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AN ANALYSIS OF VAGUENESS

by

© JOHN METHEANY

A THESIS

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IN

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled Analysis of Vagueness submitted by John Metheany in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis considers the topic of vagueness, a topic which has been given significant attention in the philosophical literature since the appearance of Russell's article, "Vagueness" in 1923. Vagueness has been almost unanimously regarded as borderline indeterminacy, which is the absence of a sharp delineation between that which is and that which is not the denotata of a word. Hence a word 'X' is vague because there are things and cases for which it is impossible to say whether or not they are X's. In the first chapter I trace the development of the borderline account from Russell through Black, Hempel, Malcolm, Quine, to Alston, and criticize each individual account. Then I criticize the borderline account in general for three basic reasons: (a) either we cannot know that a word is vague, or the vagueness of a word would increase and decrease with the rise and fall of things in the world, or the distinction between vague and clear words is nonexistent; (b) borderline indeterminacy does not necessarily inhibit communication, although vagueness seems to imply some sort of communication failure; (c) it is superficial to attempt to classify everything either as an X or as a non-X without considering amplification, modification, exception, mutation, etc. Language is not a futile attempt to label every case as clearly either X or non-X.

Chapter II has two basic arguments, which are offered both to show the disparity between vagueness and borderline indeterminacy, and to begin an account of vagueness. First, vagueness depends upon existing conditions and not imaginable difficulties. It is not a sufficient reason to label something vague simply because there are potential problems with it. Secondly, vagueness is not a property of words. It is a property of statements, passages, paragraphs and depends upon the linguistic, situational and epistemological contexts.

In the third chapter I concentrate on the evaluative aspect of the word 'vague' and use that to make some larger points about evaluation in general. The difference between criticism and blame, the stronger and weaker sense of blame (moral turpitude v. carelessness), open and complete moral terms, and excuses and justifications are explicated in their pertinence to to moral criticism, aesthetic criticism, and the charge of being vague. This chapter is somewhat tangential, being an inquiry into what it is to evaluate, but it again demonstrates the disparity between vagueness and borderline indeterminacy, and it sets the stage for a general explication of vagueness by bringing to light another of its characteristics.

The final chapter is concerned with elucidating what vagueness is. It is a failure to provide the information necessary for a sufficient understanding of what one is

attempting to communicate. The failure may be either in syntax or in reference. What is a sufficient understanding will, of course, depend upon the particular passage or utterance, together with the situational, linguistic and epistemological contexts. Furthermore, a vague passage may be insufficiently informative by (a) being too general, (b) being unclear, (c) exceeding the precision limits of a word or phrase. The way in which a passage is vague will determine what is needed to render the insufficient information to be adequate.

The hope of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the way in which language and communication work.

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In this thesis my aim is twofold. First, I wish to criticize the analysis of vagueness offered by Russell, Black, Alston, and Malcolm, all of whom identify vagueness with borderline indeterminacy. In lieu of these analyses, I want to claim that when a charge of vagueness is made that the thrust of that charge is that there has been a failure to provide information necessary for a sufficient understanding of what has been said or written.

In the thesis there is employed both a critical and a constructive approach. The critical approach predominates in chapter I, while the constructive approach is pre-eminent in chapters II, III, and IV. Each approach has its methodology. The methodology I use in chapter one is to criticize the positions of various philosophers by showing that there are certain implications or consequences of the positions which are either inconsistent with other elements of that position, or are undesirable for other specified reasons.

The other methodology is used to philosophically analyze what vagueness is, and that is done by examining ramifications of how the word ('vague', or 'vagueness') is used. But by pointing out the disparity between the analyses of 'vague' given by Russell, Black and Alston on one hand, and the way the word is used in discourse on the other, I am not <u>thereby</u> criticizing them. Ordinary usage is not necessarily "exclusively correct". Nevertheless Malcolm and Alston fall into the philosophical tradition

where merit is given to the ordinary use of words, and Black has recently discarded using the word 'vague' in association with borderline indeterminacy. And when Russell defines what it is for a word to be vague, he does not tell us whether his definition is stipulative or descriptive. Perhaps 'vague' is ambiguous insofar as having an ordinary sense and a quite different philosophic sense. But no one in the literature has mentioned that his account is either philosophical or ordinary, or even that a sense other than the one they outline exists. The omission is disturbing, however, for it is certainly incumbent upon a writer who "borrows" a word from the language and uses it in an unorthodox sense to specify that he has done so. If, however, the analysts of vagueness feel that they have not breached the ordinary sense of the word (as Malcolm and Alston surely would), then I argue that their feeling is wrong.

The question now arises, how can I possibly support the contention that there is a pronounced disparity between the borderline account of vagueness, and the way that people use the word in non-philosophical contexts? In other words, what credentials have I to describe the limits of when a term is used in its ordinary manner, and when it is not? I discuss in chapter I the fact that a noun may be used in situations where its use calls for qualification, modification, etc., by the context; this is often

accomplished by accompanying the word with adjectives like 'unusual', 'quasi', and so on. Without the relevant qualifiers the use of the word might certainly be misleading or objectionable. Are these situations included within or beyond the acceptable limits of the use of a term? This question focuses upon a new kind of "borderline" difficulty ignored by those analysts interested in borderline cases: Are we to consider borderline uses of a word where amplification is necessary as part of the "ordinary use" of that word? These uses seem not tc be as a rule considered when the uses of words are analyzed or explicated by philosophers. But surely such consideration is essential if an analysis is to be complete. The peculiarities of different groups of speakers of the language are crucial as well.

I take my task to be more modest than to be giving a complete analysis of the way 'vague' is used. Instead I am, in chapter IV, merely laying out some of the groundwork for a complete analysis. My credentials for performing the investigation are being a native speaker of English and having a familiarity with it equal to that of anyone who shares with me a similar educational background, plus the additional elements of interest and familiarity with the methods of ordinary language analysis. My linguistic background includes frequent situations in which the term I propose to analyze was used either by me or my conversant. The fact that I was unblinkingly understood by others when

I used the term, and they by me, yields a breadth to my contentions about its use. Everyone who is thoroughly familiar with a language is capable of making reasonably authoritative and competant comments on how the often-used words in that language are used. That is part of being familiar with the language. The language philosopher's authority rest on the same grounds, and disagreements between philosophers about a words use may be solved by further reflection, or alternatively, investigation of other speakers' habits, instead of necessarily degenerating into an irresolvable dispute.

In the sense outlined above, then, I do not claim to give a complete analysis of 'vague'. A complete analysis would, I think, have to consider the nuances of how the word is used by every speaker in all possible situations. But it should not be thought that an incomplete analysis is either wrong or misguided. One shows an analysis wrong by suggesting discrepancies, not fuller detail. And even discrepancies might simply show that a word is ambiguous rather than that the analysis is wrong. In any case, the groundwork is useful for setting more extensive analysts on the right track.

It is in this spirit that I submit chapter four. It is purported to be a general analysis of how 'vague' is used. If discrepancies arise, then discussion may begin as to whether the analysis is correct. I am not claiming

to show what can or cannot (or may or may not) be said, or what would necessarily be meaningless or nonsense. That claim could only be made in context. As for any putatively "meaningless expression", someone with a sufficiently creative imagination could construct a context where it could be meaningful. This point is elaborated more fully in chapter II. But at the same time it must be remembered that, to turn Austin's point around, aberration often does require modification. It could well be misleading to describe or refer to an extraordinary instance of P simply as an instance of P. And since extraordinary instances of the use of a word can be produced ad nauseam, I will be concerned with unexceptional or clear-without-qualification instances for which the use of the word 'vague' is appropriate.

Chapter four, then, should be considered an individual investigation of how our language does in fact operate; not how it should or must operate. And by the choice of the word investigated, a common and frequently pointed-out fault in the use of language will hopefully be brought to light.

The preponderance of legal, philosophic, and linguistic literature on the topic of vagueness identifies it with the indeterminacy of the application of a word to borderline cases. The word is said to be vague when such indeterminacy exists. Thus to use a standard example, 'baldness' is vague because there are men for which it is uncertain whether or not they are bald. They are the borderline cases, and the reason for the inability to say whether these men are or are not bald is not that our data is insufficient, but that our language is not detailed or precise enough. No amount of scalp inspection or hair counting will place one in a better position to judge whether such men are bald. Our lack of knowledge is not anatomical but linguistic.

The "borderline" metaphor is not essential to the preceeding analysis. Other spatial metaphors which have been used are "penumbra", "fringe", "margin", "periphery", etc. To eliminate the metaphor we may characterize the account of vagueness currently being discussed as follows: a word is vague if there are cases for which the application of the word, due to its impriceness, is uncertain. These cases of uncertainty are all that is meant by "penumbra", "borderline", etc. But for reasons I shall discuss in section VI, I think it is significant that this account

is riddled with spatial metaphors, as they are symptomatic of confusion.

In the first three sections I will be concerned with the development of the account of vagueness as borderline indeterminacy from Russell to Alston, concentrating on what it means to say that the application of a word to something is "uncertain", "questionable", "impossible to decide", etc. Section four begins a critical discussion of identifying vagueness with borderline indeterminacy, examining the possible ranges from which the borderline cases may be drawn. Section five and six concern whether or not the "borderline indeterminacy" account successfully depicts the phenomenon of language it purports to analyze.

1.1

The first philosopher to analyze vagueness as borderline indeterminacy and to publish an extensive account of it was Bertrand Russell. In the early part of his classic article he writes[1]:

> The fact is that all words are attributable without doubt over a certain area, but become questionable within a penumbra, outside which they are again certainly not attributable.

He continues by saying that the penumbra cannot be eliminated by simply refusing to apply the word to penumbral cases because the penumbra is not sharply delineated from the area of certainty. Consequently eliminating the penumbra is doomed to the same failure as trying to create

words which apply only to paradigm cases, for between baldness and penumbral baldness there will be a penumbra.

Russell claims in the quote that vagueness is characteristic of all words; scientific words, proper names and words of logic as well as ordinary words. This claim recurs throughout the literature on vagueness, but it is paradoxical. For it has the double force of enabling us to decide upon candidates for words (if it isn't vague, it isn't a word); and also enabling us to distinguish the range of application of 'vagueness'. Russell elsewhere says[2] that all representations, and only representations, are vague, and that language is a representation. And since 'vagueness' applies only to representations, it has a demarcable range of application. Therefore 'vagueness' is not vague, even though it is a word!

It might be objected here that the word 'representation' has a penumbra, and so 'vagueness' has a corresponding penumbra. But if 'vagueness' is vague (has a penumbral area of uncertainty), then since only representations are vague, the vagueness of some representations (or some words) will be uncertain. So we must either say that 'vagueness' is not vague, or that since it is vague, there will be words which fall into its penumbra of application and thereby their vagueness will be questionable. In either case, it cannot be true that all words are vague.

There are words for which it does not make sense to

begin to assess their borderline indeterminacy without the additional consideration of context, and even then in many contexts there will be no penumbra. The most notable examples are pronouns (relative, demonstrative, personal, and reflexive), and certain adverbs such as 'now', 'here', 'there', 'where', and 'when'. These words only receive their 'content' in context, and consequently it is illegitimate to assess their penumbra abstracted from use. And words which have no content--expletives (It is raining; There is no reason...)--can have no penumbra.

A significant topic is raised by the question, Exactly what does Russell mean by 'questionable' when talking about the application of a word in its penumbra? When the application is questionable, does that mean that it is difficult to determine, undetermined, or impossible to determine whether the word applies? Simply using 'questionable' would amalgamate these three kinds of cases: (a) it is questionable whether 'life' applies to any objects on Mars; (b) it was questionable (before the 1932 Donoghue v. Stevenson[3] case in English Tort law) whether 'negligence' could apply to a person's action when he had made no physical contact with the person suffering damages: (c) it is questionable whether 'bald' applies to this man. There are enormous differences between these kinds of cases, and yet Russell gives no clue to decide which of the kinds may contribute to the indeterminacy of a word, or the size of its penumbra. Moreover, how one views the ways in

which the application of a word can be questionable will determine whether and how borderline indeterminacy may be remedied.

A further question concerning Russell's use of 'questionable' is, "Questionable in what way?" That is, questionable by whom, for whom, under what circumstances, for what reasons? The answers to these questions mark a developing theme among contributors to the topic of vagueness as penumbral uncertainty. How Max Black and William Alston attempt to answer what it is for the application of a word to be uncertain or questionable will be the topics of sections two and three, respectively.

1.2

Max Black's article, appearing fifteen years after Russell's, is another landmark in the literature. He concurs with Russell both that all language is vague, and that vagueness is, in some sense, indeterminacy of application. In differentiating between vagueness and ambiguity, Black says[4]:

> A symbol's vagueness is held to consist in the existence of objects concerning which it is intrinsically impossible to say either that the symbol in question does or does not apply. The set of all objects about which a decision as to the symbol's application is intrinsically impossible is defined as the "fringe" of the symbol's field of application.

He concentrates on the "word or symbol instead of the proposition", but insists there is "no important difference ...involved."[5] By amplifying and refining this definition he hopes to replace the "crude notion" of the fringe metaphor.

To accomplish this he undertakes to define three "notions". These are: the user of a language, a situation in which a user is (trying) to apply a symbol L to an object X, and the consistency of application of L to X. Here X cannot, despite Black's claim, be restricted to objects, as there are many nouns which people use vaguely other than those referring to objects; for instance, the weather, love, creativity, words, etc. Also there are borderline cases of what verbs, adjectives and adverbs are used to refer to, even though none of these are objects.

Black offers one further definition before launching his full scale account of vagueness. He says[6]:

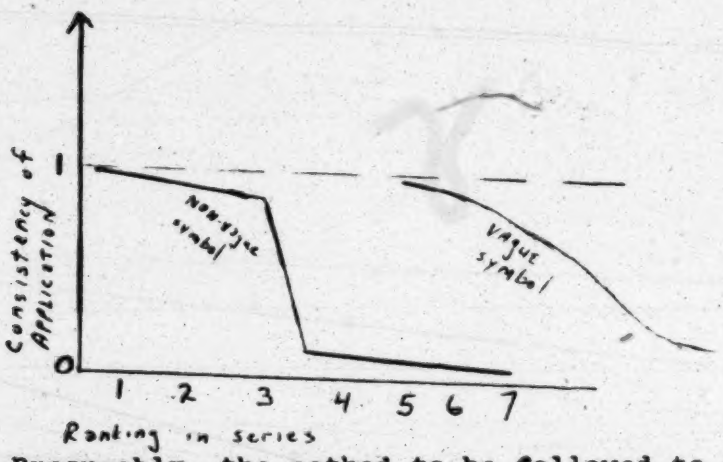
> It will be necessary to refer to situations in which a user of the language makes a decision whether to apply L or -L to an object X.

Again, we cannot limit the scope of X to objects. Anyhow, such a situation, Black stipulates, shall be called a discrimination of X with respect to L, or DxL for short.

> In any number of DxL involving the same x but not necessarily the same observer, let m be the number which issue in a judgment that L applies and n the number which issue in the judgment that -L applies. We define <u>the consistency of application of L to x</u> as the limit to which the ratio m/n tends when the number of DxL and the number of observers increase indefinitely. (The second number is of course limited to the total number of the users of the language.) Since the consistency of the application, C, is clearly a function of both L and x, it can be written in the form C(L,x).
>
> ....As we pass from left to right along the series S of terms x, the corresponding values of C(L,x) will have large values at the outset (region of "certain"

> application of L), decrease until values near to one are reached (fringe), and decrease again until values near to zero are reached (region of "certain" application of -L). A list of the exact values of C(x,L) corresponding to each member x of S will be an exact description of L's vagueness.[7]

The graphical representation of the consistency profile would look like the following:



Presumably, the method to be followed to determine the vagueness of a word is to round up a sufficiently large number of users of the language. They are then shown, for example, a somewhat gnarled block of wood and asked if it would be appropriate to call it a chair. And the consistency of their answers will enable us to decide whether the gnarled block of wood is on the periphery of the word 'chair' or not. And by collecting the consistency of answers for a series of objects (high back chairs, love seats, chaise lounges, stools), we may establish the vagueness of 'chair'.

However, the difficulties with this procedure are

severe. As Carl Hempel in a subsequent article pointed out[8]:

> ...there is no additional criterion stipulating under what conditions two objects in the linear arrangement are represented as equidistant with two other objects; in other words: no metrical order is defined on the horizontal axis. For this reason, the concept of steepness is not applicable to the consistency profile and cannot serve to introduce a measure of vagueness.

Related to the criticism made in this quote, there are three tangentially similar ways in which the consistency profile fails. First, Black gives no indication of how we are to choose x's (the examples decided upon by the language users), so nothing representative will emerge from such arbitrary selections. Secondly, even if Black were to indicate how to choose x's (e.g. every available x), we would still have no idea how to arrange them in series. Knowing how to arrange them would entail both knowing how to order the x's, and knowing how to determine the axis distance between them.. It is hard to see how such an arrangement would be possible without presupposing exactly what the procedure purports to ascertain--namely, which x's are "core" and which are borderline. Thirdly, there is no way to compare the relative vagueness of different words, since there is both no way to form a series of x's for any particular word, and the choice of x's is arbitrary. Because the consistency profile is itself non-representative of a word's vagueness, the vagueness of two words cannot be compared by examining the profiles.

The consistency profile enterprise fails on other grounds as well. For it is impossible to understand from Black's account exactly what the user of the language is supposed to tell us when he is shown an x. Black says that the user indicates whether "L or -L applies to x". Surely, however, this is need of reformulation. If we show someone a pamphlet, and ask him, "Does book or non-book apply to this?", he would either be nonplussed, or answer "Neither". We do not apply "non-book" to things which are not books. If we did, linguistic chaos would result, as we would apply, for every y and every z, $y \neq z$, y is a non-z. Books would then be non-dreams, non-quickly, and non-everything else. There would then be as many words for books as there are words. What Black must mean by "whether L or -L applies to x" is "whether or not L applies to x." But it is still not clear what the language user is to tell us; for example, let L be "chair" and let x be a stool. When he is shown the stool and asked, "Does 'chair' apply to this?", how is he to understand the question? Does the question mean "Is it possible to call this a 'chair' and be understood?" or "Is it appropriate to refer to this as a 'chair'?" "Would it be misleading to call this a 'chair'?" or "Do people ever call these 'chairs'"? Clearly how the user interprets the question will, in some cases, cause him to answer differently than if it had been interpreted otherwise; and this will adversely affect the reliability of the ratio of negative to positive answers.

Furthermore, it is extremely unlikely that for any user, we will always get a straightforward "Yes" or "No" answer when we ask him about the application of L to x. If there is a marked uncertainty concerning the propriety of terminology, then it is questionable to presume that the uncertainty will lie only within the variety of resolute answers. Individual uncertainty will be as likely as group uncertainty. But Black has given no graphic formula for weighing or measuring individual uncertainty; and it is indeed difficult to see how mathematical precision could ever be arrived at in measuring the inclinations or hesitancy of a particular individual's agreement to the use of terminology in certain situations. There is no way such assessments could be shown to be consistent among different users, nor would most people be capable of judging their degree of willingness so precisely. And yet it is as much if not more the result of individual as opposed to group uncertainty that we do in fact decide that a situation is a borderline case.

Black's explanation of what it is for something to be a borderline case of the application of a term is considerably more complicated and subtle than Russell's, but not much more successful. Black has said that the questionability involved is in some way a function of the users of the language, but he has not shown why this is so, and his explanation of how this is so is muddled. Certainly

how a word is applied is at least somewhat related to the inclinations of the language users, but as yet we have no reason to think that a word's application is entirely a function of them. Much needs to be filled in to successfully explicate the fringe area of a word.

1.3

The most recent rigorous analysis of vagueness as borderline indeterminacy is William Alston's final chapter of Philosophy of Language. He states[9]:

> A term is said to be vague if there are cases in which there is no definite answer to whether the term applies.

Alston's position, however, is actually much stronger than this quote discloses; he feels not only that there are no definite answers, but that there cannot be any. Concerning the question of whether a forty-one-year-old man is middle-aged, he says[10]:

> We have no idea what would definitely settle the question. It is not that we have not succeeded in finding the answer; there is no answer.

In other words, we shall never know whether a forty-one-year-old man is middle-aged, since there is no answer to be calculated or discovered. Even if we were to "tighten" the meaning of 'middle-aged' such that every person over forty years, six months old was middle-aged, the answer to the question "Is a forty-one-year-old man middle-aged?"

would remain unanswered for 'middle-aged' in the original sense. There are really two questions created when the meaning of 'middle-aged' is altered, and there still is no answer to the first.

For Alston, then, the area of indeterminate application of the word W is a result of there being no answer to the question, "Is X a W?" rather than disagreement among users concerning what is the answer. This is in one sense an improvement upon Black's explication since we do not usually decide whether or not X is a W by submitting the question to a cross-section of users of the language. The criteria to determine the eligibility of judges to answer the question will depend upon the nature of the word being decided upon. For instance, a knowledge of physics and chemistry would be a reasonable criterion for one to be in a position to decide whether or not the term 'argon' was applicable to a certain pliable metal. And contrary to what Black claims, the disagreement or even uncertainty among a cross-sectional representation of users of English would not commit us to regarding this metal as a borderline case of 'argon', when a group of scientists assured that it is indeed argon. Simalilarly we want only highly qualified people to make legal decisions, and consequently we do not immediately conclude that a forthcoming case is undecidable on the basis of heated cebate in the pubs. The homey examples of 'chair', 'middle-aged', and so on mislead us

into thinking that any sane user of English qualifies to determine borderline cases. But even with these examples, the inability to decide may be remedied by specific information about the case in question. In Waismann's[11] example of the water-squirting pencil as a borderline case of 'pencil', if we were asked, "Is this a pencil?", then relevant to answering this question we should want to know, Can it be written with?, Can it be sharpened?, etc. Moreover, would not the value of a person's opinion concerning whether X is a W depend upon his readiness to give reasons to support his opinion, and the quality of those reasons? The point is that it is a gross oversimplification of the manner we weigh and decide difficult cases to only require the persons who decide to be ordinary users of the language. And because knowledgable people are often more qualified to decide about the application of a word than ignorant ones, borderline indeterminacy is more a result of the nature of the word and the situation it is to be applied to, not a result of any inclinations of ordinary speakers.

But at least Black attempted to give a comprehensive account of what conditions are necessary for a case to be a borderline case of the application of a word, and how we may determine those conditions. Alston's account is absent in the second of these respects. We have no method by which we can tell whether particular questions are unanswerable in the proper way (e.g. there being no

answer rather than the answer being inaccessible to us), hence we cannot recognize a legitimate borderline case when we come across it. In other words, Alston claims that the lack of a definite answer "is due to an aspect of the meaning of the term, rather than to the current state of our knowledge." But these are not always distinct, as in the case where a metal with many but not all of the properties of argon is presented to scientists. Is this a legitimate borderline case of 'argon'? We have no way of knowing. Is the scientists' unwillingness to answer "Yes" or "No" to the question, "Is this argon?" due to the state of their knowledge about argon, or to an aspect of the meaning of 'argon'? It is due to both, because they are interrelated; a change in the former might well cause a change in the latter.

Alston identifies the increase in the state of our knowledge with the acquisition of empirical data, since the "middle-aged" example is contrasted with the uncertainty whether 'life' applies to anything on Mars. In other words, borderline cases occur when there is no more relevant empirical information unacquired, and yet there is still no answer to the question. But on one hand, the collection of empirical information is relevant for deciding cases formerly thought to be borderline, as with the water-squirting pencil. On the other hand, it is not the case once all the empirical data has been gathered and a decision has not been reached, that a decision cannot be reached.

We may simply be ignorant about how to proceed in satisfactorily reflecting upon the data acquired. Law casebooks are full of situations wherein right and wrong decisions have been reached by deliberating after the facts were all in. And our knowledge may be increased by such deliberation which goes beyond data collecting and experimentation. When it was decided that negligence could apply to situations in which no physical contact between parties was made, both our knowledge of torts was expanded, and the meaning of the word 'negligence' was unaltered. Yet the decision was not an empirical discovery. But prior to 1932, no one could have said for certain whether snails in beer bottles were genuine borderline cases of 'negligence'. Alston's distinction between the ways in which an answer may be lacking is not satisfactory, and will not thereby enable us to distinguish genuine from spurious borderline cases.

A boy walks through the forest, and cannot determine the height of a certain tree. Is this tree to contribute to the borderline indeterminacy of 'two hundred feet tall', since it is impossible for the boy to tell whether or not the tree is that height? Obviously not, since his uncertainty concerning the height of the tree has nothing to do with the meaning of 'two hundred feet tall'. To handle this and similar examples, Alston has formulated another distinction: the cases wherein we know what we must do to acquire answers, but have not done it or

haven't the means to do it; and the cases wherein we have no idea about how to go about determining an answer. Only the latter difficulty marks out a genuine borderline case. But surely the latter is as often due to a lack of knowledge as to the aspect of the meaning of a term. Often when we are inclined to answer a question by saying, "There is no way of telling", we are simply ignorant of the proper procedure by which to answer the question. Sometimes we do not know just why we cannot answer a question; questions which were formerly thought to have no answer or to be unanswerable by us turned out to be answerable if we only knew the procedure. In science, discovering methods to approach answering questions is at least as important as answering the questions themselves. And if we are to admit that there is at least one possible unfamiliar method of approaching unanswered questions, then we will be forced to admit that we can never be sure that we have a genuine borderline case.

We are left with a formidable problem. We do not know how to determine when a case purported to be borderline is unanswerable in the proper way (there is no answer to the question, Is X a W?). It seems that we will either be forced to regard questions about life on Mars as relevant to the borderline indeterminacy of 'life', which everyone wishes to deny. Or, if mere ignorance on our part is not sufficient criteria for a question being unanswerable, then

we will have to admit we do not always know when we have a real borderline case, because we cannot at times tell whether our inability to answer a question is entirely due to our ignorance. But then if borderline indeterminacy is the correct analysis of vagueness, the supporter of this account is committed to the position that in certain specific cases we cannot know whether a word is vague, when in just those cases we do as a matter of fact know this. In section six, I will examine the question of whether there are any unanswerable questions, and hence any irresolvable borderline cases.

1.4

Another serious omission among those who offer a borderline account is the non-specification of the range which the putative borderline cases must fall into. Where may we look to see if there are borderline cases of a word in question? The possibilities of this range are four in number, and in ascending order, the ranges are: (1)Cases which presently exist and which we know about; (2)Cases which presently exist whether or not we know about them; (3)Cases which atemporally exist (have existed, exist, or will exist); (4) Cases whose existence is possible. I wish to argue that the first three are untenable, and that number four presents insuperable difficulties in the way it restricts our facility with the word 'vagueness'.

Number one may be subdivided into two categories: (1a) those cases which the user of the term knows about;

and (1b) those cases which are known to at least one member of the linguistic community. If the range under consideration is restricted to (1a), then the degree of vagueness will fluctuate according to the user. The more ignorant a person is, the less vague his vocabulary will be. Hence 'chair' will be less vague for a four-year-old child than for an adult. And this will be true even though they both use the same sentence containing the word. Moreover a word could never be labelled vague; only vague with respect to some user. The relative vagueness of words would vary among users as well--for person P_1 word X could be more vague than word Y, while for P_2 Y could be more vague than X. By restricting borderlines to (1a) then, we are forced to explain vagueness in terms of two variables: vagueness of X relative to person P at time T. So there will be millions of defferent degrees of vagueness for any particular word, which is inconsistent with the penumbra account.

The same criticisms apply in an analogous fashion to (1b) and (2). (1b) will require the otherwise superflous variable of time with respect to cases known, while (2) will require the variable of time with respect to cases existing. With either we again will be able to say that a word is vaguer than itself (e.g. than it was at time T_0), since the mianing of the word will not have changed.

The philosophers offering a borderline account of vagueness would certainly protest against restricting the range of relevant penumbral cases to those presently in

existence, let alone those which are known about as well. Russell would not feel any qualms if it were demonstrated to him that no one alive then fell within the category of penumbral baldness. Black, not wishing to, does restrict himself to cases presently existing, as part of the procedure for determining a word's vagueness is to display to the discriminators cases for them to decide. But despite Black's inclinations here, his account could easily be modified to eliminate this restriction. Alston cites Waismann's paper[12]: "apart from actual cases of indeterminacy of application, one can think of an indefinite number of POSSIBLE (emphasis mine) cases in which one would not know what to say." What Quine would say is difficult to tell.*

Each of the above philosophers believes vagueness to be an irremediable condition of the words in the language. Some vagueness may perhaps be eliminated, but not all. But

*There are, Quine[13] says, two distinct sources of vagueness: objects which are only slightly similar to ones for which the verbal response has been rewarded, and inconclusive inductive labelling on the part of the user. The difficulty in interpreting Quine's position is discerning whether the two formulations are meant to be equivalent.

The second formulation restricts borderline cases to those known about or realized by the user, and consequently whether they must exist or not, the formulation will be liable to the criticisms raised with both (1) and (2). It appears that the connective "Or" in the explanation is used to mean 'alternatively', in which case the first formulation is liable to the same criticisms. If they are not equivalent, then Quine is free to authorize any scope from (1) to (4) as the legitimate interpretation. He draws his examples only from cases in existence.

in their discussions of how vagueness may be mitigated, not one of the philosophers entertains the idea that altering the number of borderline cases in the world will alter the vagueness. The approach is always from the "language side", not the "world side"; as in Hempel's[14] transformation of non-gradable words (hot) into gradable ones (135° F.). If the problem could be approached from the "world side", then vagueness could be entirely eliminated by destroying every borderline case in existence. Conversely, it would be silly to claim that "bald" was less vague at Russell's time than now, simply because there are more men with thinning hair now, since there are more men. If (2) were the range of borderline cases, then we would, as it were, have to check "stockmarket reports" on the existence of certain objects in order to estimate their vagueness. Two words with a similar degree of vagueness could alternate daily as to which was vaguer than the other. Carpenters could at leisure increase or decrease the vagueness of a word. So if we are to mark out a plausible account of vagueness as penumbral uncertainty, we shall be forced not to restrict the scope of borderline cases to the present. This oscillation of vagueness would occur whether (1) or (2) were the scope.

It is evident, then, that we must consider an atemporal sense of the existence of borderline cases (3), and whether it will provide us with a satisfactory explanation

of vagueness. With (3) there would no longer be the criticism of the juggling of the vagueness of a word as borderline cases pass into, and out of, existence. For any borderline case which ever has existed, exists, or will exist counts toward a word's vagueness at all times. The vagueness would, as it were, be "fixed" such that the only way it could be altered would be to make improvements in the logical or linguistic real estate. But although vagueness would be fixed, it would be indeterminable. Because we cannot forecast the existence of borderline cases yet to occur, we are, according to (3), helpless in judging whether a word is vague, or how vague it is. Nor may we compare the relative vagueness of different words. It may turn out, much to our surprise, that a seemingly non-vague word is indeed, and always has been, extremely vague. And because of these drastic results, (4) must be turned to as the potential legitimate scope of penumbral cases.

Somewhat like (1), (4) presents the difficulty of properly interpreting 'possible'. We cannot interpret it as merely 'probable' or 'likely', because unlikely things often occur, and would then be eligible to be penumbral cases; even though 'likely', in some degree, is the force of 'possible' ordinarily most used. To arrive at an interpretation of 'possible' which will leave us free from having to anticipate what may occur, then 'impossible' in

Austinian jargon, must wear the trousers. What is impossible will have to be set out in a schematic way, and all else be regarded as possible. But this has its problems as well, as we do not often know whether certain events, things, etc. are impossible. For example, physicists disagree on the questions, Is it impossible for anything to exceed the speed of light?; Is it impossible for there to be a perpetual motion machine? Disagreements such as these hinge on the terminological question of whether things or events which are contrary to the laws of physics are necessarily "impossible". And this is not simply a discrepancy as to whether to opt for a stronger or weaker sense of 'impossible', but is as well a disagreement concerning the absoluteness and incorrigibility of scientific laws.

As it is outside the scope of this thesis to consider the nature of scientific laws, I shall interpret 'impossible' in the stronger sense, which will turn out to be the more sympathetic interpretation for the borderline account. What is impossible, then, is either itself contradictory or contrary to the laws of science. Round squares and walking from Paris to Vienna in fifteen minutes, then, are impossible. Everything not satisfying these two conditions will be possible. One further condition, however, is relevant; within the scope of 'possible' will be included things and events which exist, are certain to exist, or have existed, although strictly speaking such

things are not really "possible".

With the range of borderline cases thus enlarged, it may be seen that the problems of ranges (1), (2), and (3) are avoided. Vagueness neither will be a function of the obtaining conditions in the world, nor will it require prognostication to be determined. And it is generally true that philosophers giving a borderline account feel that a latitude similar to (4) (e.g. imaginable) should be given to those who provide the borderline cases. Malcolm, for example, wishes to defend our tendency to think that we can distinguish between "vague" and "clear" words by the "philosopher's notion" that all words are vague.[15]

> Let us consider another example of the philosophical procedure of employing a paradox in order to emphasize a similarity or a difference. Philosophers have sometimes made the statement "all words are vague." It is the desire to emphasize a similarity between words with vague meanings and words with clear meanings which has tempted the philosophers to utter this paradox. The meaning of a word is vague, if it is the case that in a large number of situations where the question is raised as to whether the word applies or not, people who know the use of the word and who know all the facts of the situations are undecided as to whether the word does apply or not, or disagree among themselves without being able to come to any consensus of opinion. Let us call such situations "undecidable cases". A word is vague, then, if with regard to the question of its application there is a <u>large</u> number of undecidable cases. But even with respect to the words which we should ordinarily say have clear meanings, it is possible to produce undecidable cases. The only difference between the clear words and the vague ones is that with respect to the former the number of undecidable cases is relatively smaller. But then, says the philosopher, the difference between a large number of undecidable cases and a small number is only a difference of <u>degree</u>! He is, therefore, tempted to say that <u>all</u> words are really vague. But, we might ask, why

> should not the use of the words "vague" and "clear", in ordinary language, simply serve to call attention to those difference of degree?

There is no reason to think that Malcolm wishes to restrict these situations to those in existence; it is not that the language users must be placed in, or shown the situations (c.f. Black), they may simply be told about them. So it seems reasonable that the situations may be hypothetical. In this interpretation, Malcolm would be compatible with Waismann and Alston when they talk of the possible penumbral cases in which one would not know what to say. But although Malcolm's thinking is aimed in the right direction--an analysis of vagueness must account for the way the word is used--the success of his thinking is another matter. For if it turns out that there are an equal number of penumbral cases for every word; then we still cannot distinguish "vague" from "clear" words. And there are an equal number--infinitely many. If one borderline case can be produced (and Malcolm claims that all words have at least some borderline cases), then an infinite number of possible cases can be imagined, even if each differs only trivially from the other. Alston says of Waismann, "it isn't clear how numerous such cases (vanishing cats, etc.) are."[16] But there will be infinitely many. For example, 'seismograph' is what Malcolm would consider a clear word. But imagine a telescope which measures tremors in the earth by photographing stars and determining the degree

of blur, rather than by sensitive devices gauging the ripples in non-flowing water. And this telescope performs spectral analysis as well. When asked if this machine is a seismograph or not, the people who use the word would probably not, as Malcolm says, "be able to come to any consensus of opinion." So this telescope is a borderline case of 'seismograph'. This example may easily be proliferated without end; for instance, the length of the cord which plugs it in, the powerfulness of the mirror, the color, etc., all may vary, as well as there being more complex and technical variations. So the conclusion is that there are just as many borderline cases of 'seismograph' as for any putatively vague word one cares to imagine. And the fate of the borderline case account is that it, if correct, shows that it is impossible to distinguish between clear and vague words. Moreover, people are prevented from talking about degrees of vagueness, since every word is as vague as a word may be. Copilowish states[17]:

> There are degrees of vagueness, that is, one term may be less vague than another. For example, the word 'scarlet' is less vague that the word 'beautiful'. We may say that one word is less vague than another if the first is less susceptible of borderline cases than the second.

But it is now obvious that all words for which there is at least one borderline case are equally susceptible to infinitely many borderline cases, and therefore are equally vague.

1.5

Philosophers have generally looked rather favorably on the linguistic phenomenon of open-texture, which reduces to the ability of human beings to talk about differing particulars using the same word, even though some of the particulars are more clearly members of the word's application than others. Language would be impossible if this "grouping" phenomenon were prohibited, as we cannot have as many words as there are things to talk about. A large part of communication is assimilating the unexperienced to the experienced, which at times requires some questionable interpolation, metaphors and subsuming. As A.C. Benjamin[19] articulately puts it:

> If I prefer a vocabulary which is exact but extensive I shall insist that the future cases of red must be <u>exactly</u> like the past cases--under which conditions I may find that I shall never experience any cases of red at all. Or if I prefer a vocabulary which is vague but limited I shall insist that the future cases of red may be anything <u>very loosely resembling</u> the past cases--under which conditions I may find that everything I experience is red. The point is that <u>I recognize the claim of the future even when I define my symbol in the first place by reference to observed cases</u>. I purposely leave a fringe of indefiniteness around every symbol in order to allow me to select at some future time that horn of the dilemma which seems most appropiate. This fringe of indefiniteness...cannot be reduced to zero for then the symbol would have no possible future applications, yet it cannot be made exhaustive of the meaning of the symbol for then the symbol would have no distinguishable content.

The assimilation of suspiciously dissimilar cases into the application of a word is permissible if infrequent, but if it happens often an alteration in the linguistic

geography is in order. All this, however, depends on existing difficulties rather than possible ones. For example, a few seven-legged spiders could be dismissed as mutants and still be called spiders. But if there were a breed, or several hundred million of them discovered, then a revision of terminology might be deemed appropriate. However merely "imaginable" seven-legged spiders would not create the need for a revision. The significance of the penumbra, as well as the number of penumbral cases, also affects the attention given to the linguistic geography. A vivid example of this is the famous "Wousin" created by A. Ingraham in Nine Uses of Language[20]:

> We do not often have occasion to speak, as of an indivisible whole, of the group of phenomena involved or connected in the transit of a negro over a rail-fence with a melon under his arm while the moon is just passing behind a cloud. But if this collocation of phenomena were of frequent occurrence, and if we did have occasion to speak of it often, and if its happening were likely to affect the money market, we should have some name as a "wousin" to describe it. People would in time be disputing whether the existence of a wousin involved necessarily a rail fence, and whether the term could be applied when a white man was similarily related to a stone wall.

Although the thrust of this quote is in a slightly different direction, it may be used to illustrate the implausibility of complaining about imaginable borderline cases. For it is not the fertility of Ingraham's imagination which makes necessary the overhaul of the language, but the actual effect on the money market. Imaginable difficulties are not, and do not always create, practical

difficulties. And when significant or numerous practical difficulties do arise, the language will be correspondingly adapted. There may be regrettable consequences in the interim, which is probably the reason for the concern about imaginable borderlines by Black, Russell and Alston; but such consequences will be unavoidable as the only way to prevent them would be to eliminate all possible penumbras, which would eliminate the possibility of language. The point is that imaginable borderlines do not necessarily create the difficulty or need for revision which we associate with vagueness.

When, however, such a transformation of the linguistic geography does occur, it occurs not to eliminate the unavoidable vagueness of the word, but to facilitate our ability to talk about, refer to, designate the borderline cases. The borderline account counter our intuitions about vagueness, for as it was shown the penumbral area of a word will not necessarily inhibit the success of our communication. Penumbral uncertainty presents us with far fewer difficulties that philosophers claim it does, which leads us to believe that vagueness is really something more serious.

1.6

In section three, it was shown that there is a problem in distinguishing impossible-to-answer questions from those for which there just is no answer. In section four, it was shown that for any word, if there is one

possible borderline case, then there are infinitely many. I want now to consider whether there are questions which have no answers, which will bear directly on the claim that there are no irresolvable borderline cases, that all such cases may in principle be decided.

Renford Bambrough has written an excellent article in which he argues that all questions are answerable. I shall consider in detail that part of the article dealing with the application of words to penumbral situations. By claiming that in such situations any questions about the application of a word have answers, he contravenes most of the literature on the topic. His primary contribution to the subject, nevertheless, is to point out that the lack of a straightforward "Yes" or "no" answer does not entail that there is no answer[21]:

> A borderline question is one to which it seems clear that the answer "definitely yes" and the answer "definitely no" are equally inappropriate. For example, if we are asked "Is this man bald?" and the man in question has too much hair to justify us calling him definitely bald, and too little hair to justify us in calling him definitely not-bald, he is a borderline case between baldness and not-baldness. It is then tempting to say that the question "Is he bald?" <u>has no answer</u>. But this involves assuming that a question has no answer unless it has either the answer "definitely yes" or "definitely no", and this assumption is clearly mistaken. If I say "He is rather thin on top", or "He is rapidly <u>going</u> bald", or even "Well, Yes and No", I am <u>answering</u> the question "Is he bald?" And each of these possible answers, like the answer "Yes" or the answer "No" will be <u>either right or wrong</u>. A question to which "Yes" is a wrong answer, and to which "No" is a wrong answer, is not a question to which there is <u>no</u> answer, but to which some answer other than "Yes" or "NO' is the right answer.

This quote exposes a great deal of the seductiveness of the borderline account, for in the account the question the users of the language are to answer is always framed in a way which eliminates non-straightforward responses. The question is never "Is this man bald?", but "Does 'baldness' apply or not apply to this man?" And hence the only possible answers are woven into the question. Furthermore, it is incorporated into the question that if one alternative does not apply, the other must apply, so a contradiction is arrived at if the answerer is inclined to respond, "neither". A response of "neither" is further blockaded by the law of the excluded middle. Consequently when baldness neither applies nor fails to apply, the only alternative possible is to regard the question as unanswerable.

But the question of application of 'baldness' reverses against itself. For if there are cases wherein one cannot happily apply either 'bald' or 'not-bald', then it is evident that 'bald and not-bald' are not mutually exclusive. And if they are not mutually exclusive, then the contradiction in answering "neither" do not arise. Moreover, the proper way to consider the law of the excluded middle is to say we have a case where it does not apply, not to rest on its authority to legislate upon the unanswerability of questions. After all, does not its only authority lie in being able to satisfactorily handle all cases?

It is unfair, then, to put the responder in a "psychologically harnessed" position whereby he feels there are only two appropriate answers (X or -X). The question, "Does X apply or not?" should be rephrased, "Is he (this) X?" This question is equivalent to the first, as any answer given to either may be transformed without loss of meaning to the other. And it is preferable, as it invites a creative response which in many cases will be a definite answer to the question. Alston, et al, were therefore wrong in arguing that merely because there are cases in which neither 'middle-aged' or 'not-middle-aged' applies, that "there is no definite answer to the question," or that "we wouldn't know what to say." It may well be that it is impossible to either apply or withhold X, but that does not exhaust the possibilities for a definite answer.

The nature of the misunderstanding about alternatives by those offering a borderline account is a direct result of the misleadingness of spatial metaphors. Like so many philosophical problems, the "borderline case" metaphor can be used harmlessly in certain contexts, but through widespread use in these contexts it comes to dominate the thinking in other contexts where it is not so innocuous. Certainly it may be said that some instances can more clearly be examples of kind K than others. But it is then easy for philosophers to look for the "boundary" of

instances which may be classified properly as K, and when no "sharp boundary" is discernible, to draw some paradoxical conclusions about vagueness. The source of the paradoxical conclusions lies in the spatial metaphor being stretched beyond its elastic limits. The mental picture depicted by this metaphor is that a word and its opposite are linked in the same manner as the center piece and the rest of a jugsaw puzzle, to cover everything in the universe. But since there are things and events for which it is "impossible to label" either by the word or its opposite, then the philosophers conclude that there still is a boundary between the "pieces" albeit an indistinct or fuzzy one. I should think that by this this time, however, the jigsaw model becomes rather untenable. For it is not even the case that there is a clear boundary between the core and the penumbra. Nor is it true that a word or its opposite will be attributable everything (is a house a penumbral case of 'baldness'? According to Alston it must be because it is impossible either to attribute 'baldness' or 'not-baldness' to it). Furthermore there will be varying degrees of deviation from a standard or unexceptional case of kind K, for which it would be proper to refer to them as cases of K, but for which it would be misleading not to qualify them in some way (e.g. mutant, abnormal, aberrational, unusual). So even within the core it will sometimes not be enough merely to apply the word.

The primary fault of the spatial metaphor is to lead us to believe that once the decision is made either to apply or to withhold a word from a case, then the story is finished. Or if the decision cannot be made in either direction, then the question is unanswerable. But language is not a futile experiment to label every case, real or possible, as a clear instance of the application of a word. To undertake such an enterprise would require proliferating our vocabulary without end. To avoid this our language is rich in qualifiers, modifiers, and "adjuster words"[22]. Since a primary use of language is to uniquely characterize or describe the phenomena of the world in order to make clear exactly what we are talking about, the emphasis should be upon the succuss of speakers in conveying clearly what they refer to, not upon the capability of a particular word to carve out a distinct range of cases. Speakers do not fail simply when one word does not perform the task; there is still much to say, as Bambrough points out. Although it is incorrect to regard a question unanswerable because we are unable to give a straightforward "Yes" or "No" answer about the application of a word, Bambrough does not continue by showing why questions such as "Is he bald?" are not unanswerable. For the fact that questions may be answered other than by straightforward "Yes" or "No" does not entail that all such questions are answerable. But here

the critical issue would certainly be whether our language is sufficiently adaptable and fertile to adequately characterize any possible cases. In other words, the question is whether the language is in principle incapable of being as subtle, complex and intricate as any possible phenomenon it might be called on (used) to characterize. If it were, then certain questions would be unanswerable. This question, indeed an important one, seems to contain the meat of what those giving a borderline account were concerned with, but can be approached in a much more realistic way than simply analyzing penumbras. In fact, the relevant questions like, "Are there feelings and experiences which are incapable of being characterized in English?" would not necessarily ever raise the issue of penumbras.

Although the borderline account of vagueness has been shown to be in many ways woefully inadequate, this does not mean necessarily that when people are inclined to use the word 'vague' they are confused or liable to the criticisms raised in this chapter. For curiously enough, there exists nowhere in the philosophic, linguistic or legal literature arguments to the effect that borderline indeterminacy is in fact vagueness. It is simply assumed by Russell and Black, and this assumption is not questioned in the writings of subsequent philosophers who offer similar accounts. There are, then, no

compelling reasons why vagueness is not something else altogether. Such reasons are sorely needed; for when something is described as vague (a student's essay), the description is never justified by invoking a mythical panel of judges or by inventorying existing or imaginable borderline cases.

I hope to have shown in the previous chapter that the borderline account of vagueness is plagued with serious difficulties. But these difficulties only point up the unsatisfactoriness of explaining vagueness as borderline indeterminacy, not incoherency in our use of the word 'vague'. In this chapter and the next, two significant features of vagueness will be discussed, which will yield janusian consequences: first the discussion will endeavor to demonstrate the pronounced disparity between vagueness and borderline indeterminacy, as both of these features (especially the first) are wholly uncharacteristic of the latter. Secondly, these chapters will provide a transition from the primarily critical temper of chapter I to a more constructive approach in chapter IV, since the features discussed are fundamental if the question, What is vagueness? is to be answered. The first of these characteristics, discussed in this chapter, is that vagueness depends upon existing conditions, not imaginable difficulties. The second, discussed in chapter III, is that 'vague' is a critically evaluative, as well as a descriptive, word.

2.1

The procedure used by philosophers like Alston and Black to determining vagueness is, in one sense, directly contrary to the way something is ordinarily assessed as vague. Such philosophers concentrate on words, decide whether they have the purported characteristics of vagueness, and show thereby that understanding could be problematic. Ordinary people, on the other hand, conclude that something is vague <u>because</u> of a (certain type of) problem in understanding. For example, we regard advertisements such as "The hidden quality spells true value" as vague because we do not understand sufficiently what the advertisor is trying to say, not because the words in the advertisement could present difficulties in that their borderlines are not sharp. The fault in procedure committed by Black and Alston is not only in reversing the process by which we determine vagueness, but in attributing vagueness to potential problems rather than existing ones. For example, following the borderline account, Quine[1] claims that 'Mount Rainier' is vague because it is uncertain just how far one may be from Mount Rainier's summit and yet still be regarded as being on the mountain. These potential difficulties with 'Mount Rainier' do not arise every time the word is used. When the difficulties do

exist (e.g. "He stood four feet from Mount Rainier"; "Calculate the volume of Mount Rainier") we assess what is said as vague. But that there are problems with some statements involving the word 'Mount Rainier' is somehow irrelevant to other statements emplaying the same word where problems do not arise ("Mount Rainier looks pink from Seattle on summer evenings"). This latter statement, and the words contained in it, are neither problematic nor vague. The problematic statements do not always create understanding difficulties in other statements in which the same word or words occur; there isn't vagueness in every statement that 'Mount Rainier' appears in. It is a mistake, then, to characterize a word as vague "across the board" with no consideration of the statement in which it is used and the resulting understanding difficulties. Since something is described as vague because this understanding difficulty exists, ignoring the use of a word will render any account of vagueness useless.*

To show just how much vagueness is tied to use, I want to make a (a) weaker and a (b) stronger claim: (a) when the charge of vagueness is made, it is (and could only be) correctly made for that particular use along; (b) every word

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*Of course there are many ways that understanding difficulties may arise, some of which have nothing to do with vagueness. The kind of difficulties which vagueness characterizes is the topic of chapter IV.

can be used both vaguely and non-vaguely. If the stronger claim is true, then it will follow that the weaker claim is also true. The weaker claim is supported by the Mount Rainier example. "Stand four feet from Mount Rainier" could correctly, depending on the context, be deemed vague; but it does not follow either that none of the words in this command could not be used elsewhere non-vaguely, or even that the entire statement could not be used non-vaguely in other contexts, as for example, if one said "Stand four feet from Mount Rainier; that is..." and went on to provide the information necessary for the listener to know where to stand or what is meant by 'four feet from Mount Rainier'. And any word may be used non-vaguely if enough of a story is told around it, or if the circumstances in which it is uttered are conducive to it being sufficiently understood. Therefore whenever someone characterizes a word as vague or being used vaguely, he is not making his remarks pertain to other contexts in which the word is used.

The first conjunct of the stronger claim is all that is left to be shown, as it was shown in the preceeding paragraph that any word can be used non-vaguely (second conjunct). That any word can be used vaguely is evident if we merely posit that the context surrounding the word does not permit it to be sufficiently understood. Since the claim is not a factual one (i.e. that a word <u>is</u>

or has been used vaguely), the demonstration of how any word could conceivably be used vaguely requires only a moderately fertile imagination. There are words which frequently "trigger" vagueness ('sort of', 'mostly', 'somewhat') which makes the task easy. These words are not vague in themselves but usually do not "work well" with other words without a good deal of elaboration and qualificaiton. We can simply imagine this elaboration not being provided.

How any word may be used vaguely will be more rigorously demonstrated in section three of this chapter, after it has been explained how the context contributes to vagueness. But it should be intuitively obvious that whenever someone's writing is vague, there cannot be only a select number of words of the language which can be contained therein. Vagueness cannot only be characteristic of a segment of the words in the language.

The question then arises about the status of "characteristically vague" words such as: 'progress', 'democracy', 'standard', and 'good'. If these words are vague in themselves, then the second conjunct of the stronger claim is refuted, because presumably these words will invariably be vague. But 'words vague in themselves' can only be meaningful if such words can be distinguished from other words which are not vague in themselves. But how do we recognize words which are like the ones above as being

vague, while others are not? It is because these words are, as it were, signal lights for hazy expressing in the area. That is, unless the speaker makes it quite clear what he means by 'liberty', 'progress', etc., the understandability of what he is saying will be minimal. But of course it does not follow that every time these words are used, vagueness will necessarily obtain. Otherwise the fairly common situation of these words in perfectly clear contexts would be impossible (e.g. "I have made considerable progress on my apartment--the walls and baseboards were painted yesterday"). It is simply that when these "characteristically vague" words are used the speaker or writer must be conscious of making sure that what he is saying is sufficiently understandable (but doesn't he always have to?). If he is wary enough to recognize these words, and those words which easily "trigger" vagueness, and if he is adept enough to express well what he is trying to say, then he will have performed his task successfully, as will have his teachers who taught him to be cautious when using such words.

Vagueness, then, cannot be analyzed or allocated without reference to context or use. Whenever we talk about the vagueness of a word, we must, if we are to be correct, be talking about, among other things, the word in some specific context.

Haig Khatchadourian[2] made the same mistake the philosophers giving analyses of the penumbras of words made. He rejects the penumbral account of vagueness, yet he associates vagueness with "expressions" (ordinary words or phrases), which is to ignore all contextual considerations. Expressions either are, or are not, vague, according to him. His analysis is an attempt to provide us with a method for determining whether any given expression X is vague. But there is no proper method, since "Is the expression X vague?" is an illegitimate question. For it has been shown that any word may be used either vaguely or non-vaguely. But no word is, in itself, either vague or non-vague.

The only examples of "vague expressions" which Khatchadourian gives are words extracted from philosophical contexts (e.g. 'emanation' from Plotinus, 'copy' from Plato, 'dread' from Heidegger[3]). But these examples conflict with his analysis. They are not expressions, or even "philosophical expressions"; but are philosophical <u>uses</u> of expressions. For the word is 'emanation' which Plotinus, 'copy' which Plato uses, etc. And the problem lies not with these words, but certain philosophical uses of them. The expressions 'copy' and 'dread' are not vague, but then neither are they non-vague. Vagueness, contrary to what Khatchadourian and those

offering a borderline indeterminacy account claim, is not a property of words or expressions.

2.2

The most obvious alternative way to analyze vagueness, in light of the above criticisms, is in terms of the use of a word instead of words themselves. This is the way James Bohan explained it in his dissertation, Vagueness: A Critical Examination of Some Traditional Analyses. Having criticized the identification of vagueness with words, he opts for explaining vagueness as being characteristic of expression tokens instead of expression types. He continues[4]:

> Expression tokens occur in what people say and write. The saying and writing are themselves acts in which people engage, usually intentionally. Such acts have been called "speech acts"... A speech act is datable. So to characterize a speech act as vague will be to claim that vagueness characterizes what a person said (wrote, etc.) on a certain occasion. And to say that a certain expression is vague will be to say that typically a speech act in which the expression occurs is vague.

This quote displays confusion over what it is to use an expression, which carries over into the concept of speech acts. This confusion may be brought out in light of truth and falsity. My stating a fact is an historical occurrence. It may be timed, recorded, or dated. But it can no more be true or false than an inning could. The stating of a fact must be, for Bohan, an example of what a speech act is, since speech acts are datable. But

then speech acts, being performances, are neither true nor false. On the other hand, what I stated may be true or false, and that is not a speech act. The saying of something is a speech act, what is said is not. Now when someone claims that a statement, paragraph, or speech is vague, it is manifestly not the historical speech act he is assessing, but what is said in performing the speech act. The content of the speech act is what is being assessed, which is not datable. Similarly the writing of a paper may take many hours, but it is only woat is written in the paper which is liable to be vague. So it is a philosophical mistake for Bohan to characterize datable speech acts as being vague and to assimilate them to what a person said.

The quote gives a conflicting account, then, of expression tokens. And since vagueness is obviously not a property of the consituent elements of datable speech acts, then the alternative that Bohan gives--namely that vagueness occurs in units of what people say or write--needs to be examined.

Although Bohan does not spell out the procedure, presumably the method for determining vagueness, on his account, would be first to isolate the expression token and then to see if it is vague. What we do to see whether it is vague is not specified. Nor is the crucial consideration of why uses of a word, instead of

words, are vague. Is it because vagueness applies to the sum total of a word's uses, instead of to that word itself? If so, then it needs to be shown why it is wrong to call a word vague, while the uses of that word will always be vague. Or is it because some uses of a word may be vague while others are not? But then the essential questions of <u>why</u> and <u>how</u> some uses, but not others, may be vague requires answering. The incompleteness in these respects of Bohan's account causes in part the profound circularity of the following quote[5]:

> Consequently, our inquiry into the nature of vagueness must now focus upon particular occasions in which what has been said was vague, for it is here that vagueness has its roots,and claims that a particular expression is vague are only intelligible against a background of there having been particular occasions in which speech acts containing tokens of that expression were vague--vague, that is, in virtue of containing these expression tokens.

Bohan never explains what the force of 'expression' in the phrase 'expression token' is. The traditional type-token distinction is made in reference to words, and apparently Bohan is amending this by calling tokens "expression tokens" in order that units of language larger than words (phrases) may be the source of the vagueness of some passage. He does not show why tracing vagueness to uses of words is misguided, or why such larger units would be more acceptable. For surely there

is a problem in tracing the source of vagueness to expression tokens, which is the same problem of tracing it to uses of words. Often it is impossible to precisely isolate the vague section of a speech or paper from the rest of it. And the vague section may be considerably longer than an expression is usually thought to be (in fact, an entire paper may be vague), even though it is impossible to divide the vague paper into vague expression tokens.

Vagueness simply cannot be satisfactorily analyzed by considering only determinate units of language-- words, uses of words, phrases, expression tokens, or whatever. In so far as this is true, vagueness is not a unit phenomenon. The inability of a teacher to say precisely what part of a student's paper is vague is not necessarily a consequence of the teacher's incompetence. It is a consequence of the fact that words, phrases, etc., cannot be analyzed as discrete, autonomous units without neglecting much of what is crucial to vagueness (and meaning), namely the functionally operative relation between words, between sentences, between paragraphs. And to bear down on any one word or phrase or sentnece to the exclusion of the rest of what is said will cause one to miss this "working togetherness", and thereby much of what vagueness is. Quantification, elaboration, comparison, etc., may eliminate vagueness where fewer words would not. If one

went on to explain what he meant by 'liberty', and in what way this country's heritage exemplifies it, then the otherwise potentially vague statement "This country has a heritage of liberty" would not be vague. The linguistic context (in this case the explanation) sufficiently amplifies the statement to prevent vagueness. Hence a successful analysis of vagueness could not ignore the linguistic context.

It is not only important to realize when determining whether a word is used vaguely that the context is crucial, but frequently the vagueness of some passage or remark will not be traceable to words or phrases alone. One must consider the way in which words when taken as a consummate whole contribute to understanding. 2.3

J.L. Austin, in his How To Do Things With Words, drew the following distinction between two elements of the locutionary act[6]:

> The pheme is a unit of language: its typical fault is to be nonsense--meaningless. But the rheme is a unit of speech; its typical fault is to be vague or obscure, etc.

Speech, for Austin, is language being used, so in light of what has already been said, he quite correctly diverts our attention from considering the vagueness of words abstracted from use. He makes this same point in Sense

and Sensibilia when he says in less technical language: "Usually it is uses of words, not words themselves, that are properly called 'vague'"[7]. But in a conflicting fashion, though somewhat closer to the truth, he continues[8]:

> If, for instance, in describing a house, I say among other things that it has a roof, my not saying what kind of roof it has may be one of the features which lead people to say that my description is a bit vague; but there seems to be no good reason why the word 'roof' itself should be said to be a vague word.

In this quote we see that it is not the use of the words in the description, but the description itself, that is vague. And we cannot decompose descriptions into rhetic units, because descriptions are, according to Austin, themselves illocutionary acts[9], whereas rhemes are used in the locutionary act. A description is not speech but what is done in speaking. Austin has given us the key to separating speech from what speech can be used to do. But he has fallen prey, in his discussion of vagueness, to glossing over the very distinction he is intent upon making. Descriptions simply cannot be analyzed, without remainder, into uses of words (rhemes). Saying 'it', saying 'has', saying 'a', saying 'roof' are all rhemes, but putting them together does not constitute entirely the description of my house. Consequently, if it is descriptions which are properly called 'vague', then vagueness is not a property of rhemes.

We have come a long way from the borderline account of vagueness. Those offering that account have analyzed vagueness as a property of words. Bohan felt that vagueness was instead a property of rhemes or groups of rhemes. Austin is a bit schizophrenic in his approach to vagueness, alternatively identifying it with rhemes and illocutionary acts. If it is true that statements, answers, descriptions, paragraphs (in one sense), remarks, and the like are vague, then the proper place to look for vagueness is in the illocutionary act. And even when it is said, for instance, that his use of 'progress' was vague, what is meant is that his use of 'progress', coupled with his failure to sufficiently modify and amplify it, made his statement vague. And of course statements may be vague without there being any rheme responsible.

Austin has correctly seen that illocutionary acts, unlike locutionary ones, cannot be dissected into units. There are no component parts of a description. Hence analyzing vagueness in terms of illocutionary acts, together with the context, reinforces the claim made in section two that vagueness cannot be reduced to discrete units. Identifying vagueness with rhemes, which endorses this reduction, is too atomic in approach. And it is obviously a misguided approach to attempt to

divide a vague remark into units, all of which are themselves vague.

It must not be thought that when the claim is made about vagueness being a function of the entire context, that only the linguistic cnntext is relevant. The situational context (the situation in which the remark is made) and the epistemological context (the relevant background knowledge of the person to whom the remark is made) are paramount too. A statement, conversation, etc., may be vague at one particular time to one particular person, but not vague at a different time to another person. For example, if I were to say "I have made considerable progress on my apartment; I am nearly finished now," then it would be a precondition for me not being vague that the person I was talking to knew I had been spending much time painting. Simply that he knows it is not enough, however, he must also realize that it is the painting I am talking about. Much, therefore, relies on the ability of the listener to connect what he already knows or what is evident with what I am saying, and the responsibility for that ability is largely the speaker's. The speaker can presume that ability either because it is clear from what has been said before (I have just mentioned painting my apartment), or because the listener knows from previous experience what I am

talking about (he helped me paint yesterday, and knew I was very anxious about having it done before tomorrow), or because the situation in which the remark was uttered made it clear what I am talking about (the listener, a friend, greets me in a paint store while I am looking at how-to-do-it books on interior painting). These contexts are respectively, the linguistic, epistemological, and situational. The last is of course far more important in speaking than in writing, and the epistemological consideration becomes less significant as the audience becomes more heterogeneous. The point is that it may still be wrong to charge a person with vagueness simply from examining the linguistic context. The required understanding may be provided in other ways. So it is even too restrictive to analyze vagueness in terms of the entire linguistic context. The time-killing elevator conversations would be quite vague if they were spoken in another context, say, in an encounter group.

It may now be seen more clearly how any word can be "used vaguely", which is the first conjunct of the stronger claim made in section one. Any word may be coupled with others such that the result is not meaningless but a failure of the speaker to provide a sufficient amount of understandability to what he says. All we need posit is that the situational, linguistic, or

epistemological contexts are not conducive to the remark in which the word is contained being sufficiently understood. And vice-versa, it may be seen how any word can be used non-vaguely.

In conclusion, "what is said", in an illocutionary sense of 'said', is what is vague. But the illocutionary act must be viewed with respect to the situational, linguistic and epistemological contexts. And if vagueness is the appropriate description, it will be so because of existing comprehension difficulties, not imaginable ones.

The major claim I wish to make in this chapter, namely that 'vague' is evaluative as well as descriptive, has been made implicitly by several philosophers, and explicitly be Max Black[1] and James Bohan[2], both of whom claim that 'vague' has "pejorative" connotations. I want to examine the ramifications of 'vague' being an evaluative word insofar as they are philosophically significant and reflect upon the accounts of vagueness offered by Black, Malcolm, Alston, etc.

3.1

Bohan and Black are correct in regarding 'vague' as a pejorative word. To describe a passage as vague is to asses it as well, and the assessment is invariably critical. Being critical of something is finding it to be in some way faulty. People usually try to avoid being vague, and will attempt to rectify themselves when what they say is evaluated along these lines. One of the purposes of saying or stating something is to do it as clearly as possible, and one of the ways a person may fail in this respect is by being vague. It will therefore be logically odd to say, "What you have written (said) is vague, although I find nothing wrong with it," since packed into the notion of 'vague' <u>is</u>

that there is something wrong with what is characterized.

Of course any item could be faulty or any passage could be vague without anyone ever having evaluated it as such; things do not become faulty only upon being negatively evaluated. But in order that an evaluation be successful or accurate, the thing which is critically evaluated must really be faulty. So when I talk about evaluations, I am implying that they are successful or accurate; consequently the additional question of whether the passage really is vague will not arise. Another requirement for a sucessful negative evaluation is that the assessor must be able to identify why or in what way the object evaluated is faulty; otherwise the most he can properly say is that he thinks it is faulty (it may really be faulty nonetheless). A claim, "This is faulty", is a knowledge claim, as one may respond "How do you know?" And for a person to be in a position to know something is faulty he must be able to answer this question, or to show in what way it is. Emotive statements are different from evaluative statements in this way--one can legitimately say that he does not like ice cream without being able to say why.

Although the person making the negative evaluation must be able to identify or isolate the fault, and he thereby knows what it would be for that sort of fault to

be removed, he himself does not necessarily have to be capable of actually completing the better barn-building task. For example, if Smith criticizes a novel for being boring, it does not follow that he could write an exciting novel or improve on this one so it is no longer boring. This means that he could recognize such a novel when it comes along, that he could either describe a novel which is not boring, or have in mind an example of one. If an X is criticized, therefore, it does not follow that a non-faulty X actually exists or ever will exist (all X's may be faulty; all people may be sinners). Nor does it follow that the critic could recognize what it would be like for this X to be non-faulty, especially if the fault created comprehension difficulty. The plot of a novel could be so confusing that the critic could not recognize it if it were improved, or describe what the plot would be if it were not confusing. But the critic must be able to either explain or give an example of something of the same kind, actual or hypothetical, which is not faulty (e.g. some plot which is not confusing); otherwise it does not make sense for him to evaluate it as faulty.

Five general points have emerged concerning evaluations:

(a) Smith successfully evaluates X as faulty $\supset$ Smith knows where X's fault lies.

(b) Smith successfully evaluates X as faulty $\not\supset$ Smith could improve X or make a better X.

(c) Smith successfully evaluates X as faulty $\not\supset$ a non-faulty individual of the same kind as X exists.

(d) Smith successfully evaluates X as faulty $\not\supset$ Smith knows what it would be like for X to be non-faulty.

(e) Smith successfully evaluates X as faulty $\supset$ Smith knows what it would be like for some individual of the same kind as X to be non-faulty.

(The $\supset$ sign means that in order for the antecedent to be true, the consequent must be true.)

Furthermore, (f) when something is critically evaluated $\not\supset$ it could have been better; in other words, the possibility of that which is evaluated being different is not necessarily relevant; for we can negatively evaluate a person's athletic ability, a terrain for building houses, etc.

Not all of these six points are entirely true of 'vague', since a failure of a general category of statements to imply something will not prevent a subset of that category from implying it. But of course if all successful evaluative statements imply a certain condition, then a successful statement assessing something as vague will also imply that condition. The remainder of this chapter will be an investigation of how these six points are relevant to a charge of vagueness.

If Smith successfully criticizes a passage for being vague, then it is obvious that he knows wherein the passages's fault lies, because he has identified the fault--vagueness. Since'vague' is descriptive, then in levying a charge of vagueness Smith has done much more than simply saying the passage is faulty; he has shown in what way it is faulty. Hence point (a) is a proper implication for the vagueness charge.

Moreover, if Smith criticizes a passage for being vague, he is not thereby claiming to know what this passage would be like were it not vague. For if the vagueness were eliminated, the passage would not be the same passage. What is being said would be clarified yet remain essentially the same, but the passage itself changes when the structure is altered. So 'Knowing what this passage would be like were it not vague' is fundamentally different from 'Knowing what this waterpipe would be like if it did not have a bent stem', in that the stem could be straightened without constructing a different pipe. One improves a passage only by constructing another more satisfactory one. So 'Knowing what this passage would be like were it not vague' is a curious remark. Additionally, the vagueness of the passage may be so severe that it entirely obscures for Smith what the author is attempting to express, in which

case he would neither (b) be able to improve the passage, nor (d) recognize what a non-vague passage saying the same thing as the one being criticized would be like.

Although it is not directly implied from Smith criticizing a passage for being vague that (c) a non-vague passage actually exists, it is nonetheless the case that the consequent is true: there are non-vague passages. This is primarily an empirical claim, not a philosophical one, even though the claim by those offering an account of vagueness as borderline indeterminacy, namely that it is impossible in our ordinary language to say something non-vaguely, is false for philosophical reasons as well. For what would a language be like in which everything capable of being said, including charges of vagueness, necessarily created comprehension difficulties? It would be a language in which every communication attempt would be in some degree a failure, including teaching novices the language. Such a "language" would hardly be a language, as simple requests, warnings, statements, and so forth could never be sufficiently clear or informative. Consequently one of the prerequisites for something being a language is that through the use of it certain

things must be capable of being expressed clearly. And it is just empirically false that everything ever said in English or in any other language has been vague.

Although Smith need not know "what this passage would be like were it not vague", he must know what it would be for some passage or other not to be vague. In other words, he either has in mind some other passage which is not vague when he criticizes the one in question, or he concurrently with his criticizing has the capacity to identify a non-vague passage. For if Smith did not possess this discriminitory power then he would not have the requisite discrimination to evaluate the passage in question as vague. Of course he could have made a lucky guess that the passage is vague while possessing no discrimating prowess, but then a lucky guess is not an evaluation. It is simply that in order for someone to know that the term X is attributable to something, he must also be capable of recognizing when X is clearly not attributable to at least some other things. There may be controversial or "borderline" cases when he cannot tell whether X is attributable, but he will be able to in the obvious cases. And 'vague' is a specific instance of this general statement.

The final point (f) that when something is critically evaluated ⇏ it could have been better, can be broken down into two questions when considering how it is relevant to vagueness: When a passage is correctly evaluated as vague, (1) is it the case that the speaker or writer of the passage can at times do better? (2) is it the case that the speaker can always do better with the vague passage?

The first question, can the speaker or writer of a vague passage at times speak or write non-vaguely? is aligned with the question of whether it is imaginable that a speaker of a language is capable of saying nothing but vague things. Hence the answer to question (1) of point (f) will depend more upon what the characteristics of being a speaker of a language are then it will upon vagueness being evaluative. Being vague requires considerably greater adeptness than occurs with rudimentary speech efforts. For other than in highly unusual situations, people are vague when trying to express relatively difficult or precise thoughts. When one considers the speech of young children, vagueness is largely absent. Whenever one does not understand what a child is saying, the "working-togetherness" of the words will seldom be the problem, because young children do not say very abstruse

or complicated things. Instead the problem is usually the way in which they use the words, which is a meaning, not a vagueness problem. But "knowing the meaning" of the words one uses is at least in part knowing how to say clear, comprehendible things with them. Therefore, if one can only say vague expressions, he does not really know the meaning of any of the words in the language. And as a result he could hardly be considered a speaker of the language.

Furthermore very simple claims ("I am hungry"), requests ("Hand me the milk"), questions ("Was he born in Canada?"), etc., are in almost every context non-vague; and yet we would certainly be reticent to regard persons who could not master such claims, requests and questions, or who could use them only in situations where they would be vague, as being speakers of the language. Hence being able to say vague things presupposes that one can also say clear things, otherwise he cannot say anything. If we choose to teach a foreigner how to say an English phrase which was vague, and that was all he knew, then if he did not understand what the words he was saying actually meant, he would not be speaking English, but only reciting something in English. And to understand the words he would have to be able to say something clearly with them, even

holophrastically (using one word to do the job of an entire sentence: e.g. "Come" for "Come with me"). deLaguna, in her book, Speech: Its Function and Development, claims that all holophrastic speech is vague. But this is obviously false when the situational and epistemological contexts are taken into account. For often it is perfectly clear that when the child points and says "Ball", tha he wants the ball; and when a man crawling through the desert grasps deLaguna by the leg and cries "Water!" it is silly to think that her response could only be, or should be, "I am sorry, old man, but could you be clearer?"

Foreigners and even speakers of English often use holophrastic speech ("Why?", "Now", etc.) which is saying something in English non-vaguely. One who could not even do this is not a speaker of English. So there can be no such thing as a speaker of a language who can only say things vaguely. And even a person who is not a speaker of the language cannot be imagined to say only vague things except in the sense that a parrot says "Good morning, Glory." Neither the parrot nor the person could be construed to know the meaning of their words, to know what they are saying, and thereby they are not making statements, commands, requests, etc. They are simply uttering words or reciting.

As a result, saying something which is vague is always a substandard performance for the speaker as well as for the entirety of speakers of a language. So the answer to question (1) of part (f) is "Yes; the speaker of a vague remark can at times do better."

The second question (Can the speaker always do better with the vague passage?) can be broken down into two parts, and the answer will depend upon the truth of the consequent of each: (i) X is vague $\supset$ Xis reconstructable into a non-vague passage; (ii) X is vague $\supset$ the speaker himself is capable of reconstructing X into a non-vague passage. The truth of the consequent of (ii) depends upon the consequent of (i), and the truth of the indicative version of the question depends upon the truth of the consequent of (ii). However, as it turns out, none of the three is true.

Regarding (i), there are cases wherein a person is vague and yet the linguistic difficulty is insurmountable, due either to the difficulty of the concept he is trying to express or to the paucity of the language. Both will depend upon the epistemological context, though. As an example of a relevant conceptual difficulty; trying to explain to a layman (epistemological context) what is meant by saying space is curved. An example of linguistic paucity would be trying to explain to someone who had never had the feeling (epistemological context)

the sense of exhiliration one feels when he discovers something unnoticed--a friend, a gesture, a moment--which gives his life a profound meaning and warmth. When such passages are criticized as vague, it is not the case that the passage can be reconstructed into a non-vague passage. Hence (i), and therefore (ii) do not have true consequents. The answer to question two, then, is "No".

But the consequent of (ii) is not true even with some cases where a remark is both vague and reconstructable, as in the case of children and foreigners. The vagueness is eliminable, though not by the speaker. It is true that in fact we do not often speak of children and foreigners as being vague, but that does not alter the fact that they are. We do not levy the criticism because of its unconstructiveness. When the speaker is capable of rectifying the vagueness, we charge him with being vague in hopes that he will do the rectifying, either now or next time. But with children and foreigners, it is often pointless to make the evaluation. Nevertheless it is accurate to describe what they say as vague.

But in very many cases where vagueness obtains, the speaker is capable of improving the passage and thereby the passage could have been better (f). But it is not always the case, hence (f) is true concerning vagueness: when something is critically evaluated as

vague, it could have been better. The examples discussed in reference to part (i) bear this out.

3.2

As many of the features of vagueness being negatively evaluative were discussed in section one, it will now be appropriate to compare an evaluation of a passage as vague with two other kinds of negative evaluations, namely moral and aesthetic. But as a preliminary, some distinctions between criticizing and blaming need to be made clear.

When someone is blamed for something, it is implicit that he (the agent) should have and could have done otherwise (one is only blamed for doing or omitting to do something). 'Blame' has a stronger and weaker sense: when a person is blamed in the strong sense, the implication is that he did or omitted what he did deliberately; when a person is blamed in the weaker sense, it is merely implied that he could have, with reasonable attention, done what he should have done, or avoided what he did, even though he did not do it deliberately or even voluntarily, as when someone is blamed for being clumsy. One cannot be sucessfully blamed in either sense for that over which he has no control, or for that which he cannot reasonably be expected to foresee.

Criticism may be levied against anyone or anything

that is faulty, regardless of the opportunity for that which is criticized to either be or have done otherwise. Actions, things, people, etc., may be the subject of criticism. When a person's action is criticized, he is not thereby criticized, except insofar as he is criticized for his action. It is the action that is found faulty, and not necessarily the agent as well.

When an action is morally evaluated in a negative way, both the elements of blame and criticsm are necessarily implicit. The action is criticized, and the agent is blamed in the stronger sense. An immoral act has not occurred if either element is absent. When someone does something which he did not do deliberately, then moral criticism cannot be successfully levied and consequently a sucessful negative moral evaluation is not possible. A man accidentally falling from a tree and killing another is not guilty of an evil act precisely because he did not kill the man deliberately. As a result, he cannot, in the strong sense, be blamed for the death, and therefore moral criticism is illegitimate. If the example is amplified such that the man was grossly negligent in climbing the tree, he still cannot be morally charged for the death, as the fall was non-deliberate. He now, however, is considerably more responsible for the death, as he could have been more careful. Even when

a motorist drives recklessly and thereby kills accidentally a pedestrian, he is morally culpable for endangering pedestrians by driving recklessly, but not morally culpable (though definitely responsible) for killing the pedestrian. What he was morally blameworthy for resulted in the death of the pedestrain, but the morally iniquitous act was only driving the car recklessly. Turpitude can be assigned to the manner in which the car was driven, but not to the killing. "I didn't mean to" is always, if true, a successful defeat of a moral charge. This is clearly seen in the bizarre cases like when a fisherman, dropping his traps overboard, detonates an abandoned mine which kills a skin diver. The fisherman did not mean to kill him, so there can be no moral blame for the death even if he (the fisherman) was carelessly casting his traps in dangerous waters. He would then be morally culpable for fishing carelessly however, thereby incurring responsibility for the death.

In these cases, it is tempting to regard the action as still capable of being morally criticized, even though the agent is not blameworthy. But regarding it so is incorrect reasoning. The action would be immoral if performed deliberately, but it was not, so it falls into the category of cases including avalanche deaths, or being gored by oxen. Of course someone may say that

God or nature is responsible for these deaths, and did them deliberately, hence the actions are immoral. But this is merely reassigning agency.

With aesthetic criticism, blame, in either sense, is not an element. We blame artists for scandal or poor effort, not for unbalanced paintings. The plot of a novel is confusing, or a symphony is disjointed, despite either the indeliberateness of the author/composer, or his ability to do otherwise. Of course mitigating circumstances are often taken into consideration when aesthetic evaluations are made, in much the same way as they are in sports (this is a good mural considering it had to be painted so quickly, his giant slalom time was excellent considering he has only one leg). But the point is that mitigating circumstances do not, unlike with moral criticisms, make aesthetic criticism impossible, and derivatively, it is not a philosophical mistake to compare and classify a work of art where mitigating circumstances do obtain with works where they do not.

There are two sorts of mitigating circumstances: excuses and justifications. When a sucessful excuse is offered, the agent is absolved of blame in the strong sense, but the action may still be criticized and he may be blamed in the weak sense (better excuses will absolve all blame). Concerning morality, an excuse removes the act from the moral sphere by making it part of a larger,

non-moral act (I tripped over the fence and the gun went off), and showing that the action being morally considered was not deliberate. Hence a sucessful excuse makes impossible moral criticism, although not aesthetic criticism. It is more correct, then, to say that people are excused for their actions than that their actions are excused, as blame only applies to agents, and excuses eliminate blame potential. When a sucessful justification is given (He was coming at me with a knife), then both the agent and the action are absolved of criticism and blame. In the moral sphere it makes the action morally neutral or positive. Elsewhere it assuages any possible criticism.

In moral philosophy there is a common distinction between open and complete moral terms. With an open term, like 'killing', one cannot decide upon the morality of the act (i.e. the strong sense culpability of the agent) by the applicability of the term. There are morally positive, negative, and neutral instances of killing, and hence there is room for moral judgment within the scope of the term. Complete moral terms, on the other hand, are morally decisive solely in virtue of the application of the term (e.g. 'murder'). All instances of murder are morally wrong. 'Murder' applies only to those cases of killing which are morally negative. If there is a successful excuse or justification, then the killing cannot be murder.

In an analogous fashion, we may analyze words to see if they are open or complete evaluative terms. There will be two categories of complete evaluative terms: those terms which are complete if they apply only when blame, in either sense (or commendation) is appropriate, and terms which are complete if they apply only when criticism (or approval) is appropriate. Moral terms, and such words as 'garrulous', 'puerile', 'careless', and 'boorish', and all other words which denote actions which we assume the agent could control with reasonable attention, fall into the first category. In the second there are words which are always used critically, but only sometimes impute blame, like 'useless', 'substandard', 'awful', 'arcane', etc. A third category, evaluative open terms, which consists of words which can potentially be used to evaluate, contains every other word which can be used to describe. Every word which can be used to describe can be used to evaluate (e.g. 'green' when applied to tomatoes, 'six feet tall' when applied to basketball players), which should, I think, destroy the traditional dichotomy between evaluative and descriptive words.

'Vague' falls into category two. It is always critical, because one of the fundamental purposes of speaking or writing is to clearly communicate something; and being vague is always a failure in some degree in this respect. The passage is always faulty in this way. Regardless

of the additional circumstances, criticism may always be directed toward this fault, and always is when the charge of being vague is made. And whatever other attempted excuse may be offered, it will never rectify this criticism, since excuses only rectify blame.

Being vague is usually culpable (in the weaker sense), as we assume that the speaker could have, with sufficient effort, said what he was trying to get across more understandably. But even though this is usually the case, a charge of vagueness does direct itself to a passage irrespective of the agent's ability to do otherwise. For example, the scientist cannot be blamed for being vague when explaining how space is curved; he could not have been otherwise. The poet might be blamed for trying to express the inexpressible, but that is not to say that he is blamed for being vague. Against the child and the foreigner (as well as against the scientist and poet) criticism of what they said is appropriate and in fact is levied when an assessment of vagueness is made. But as they could not have done otherwise, blame is inappropriate. They have successful excuses.

Since, however, blame is often appropriate, it cannot be true that language is inevitably vague. 'Vague' is a contrast word. And this is exactly the conclusion Malcolm wishes support with his modified borderline

account. But both he and the other philosophers defending the borderline account fail to grasp what is occuring when the word 'vague' is used. The object of blame is not the language, but the speaker (when blame is appropriate) for his use of the language. What is faulty is neither the speaker nor the language, but what he said. 'Vague' is in this respect similar to our ordinary use of 'obscene': people find fault with what is said and blame the speaker. But it is sill to argue that all language, or all words, are obscene.

Vagueness charges, then, fall between aesthetic and moral criticisms in terms of the ability of the agent to have done better. We do not expect everyone who paints to paint well, but we do expect nearly everyone, in most circumstances, to avoid being vague. But a person may be vague, although not immoral, irrespective of his capacity to be otherwise. Blame is always a factor in moral criticism, but almost never in aesthetic criticism. It frequently is a factor in a vagueness charge, but in a weaker sense of 'blame' than is applicable to agents of immoral acts. In sum, a vagueness charge is always critical, and often blame imputing. There are excuses which will make blame inappropriate, but vagueness cannot be justified. If a justification is successful, 'vague' is not the appropriate word to describe and evaluate the remark or passage.

It will be remembered that 'vague' is used in a critically evaluative way. The claim "This is vague" is an indication of something being thought unsatisfactory or a request for improvement. But in what way should that which is vague be improved? In what way is it unsatisfactory?

In this final chapter I want to pursue the brief discussion in chapter II of the connection between vagueness and understandability by analyzing vagueness as a failure to provide the information necessary to yield a sufficient understanding in the context. Lastly I wish to make several points about the kind of non-linguistic substantives which the adjective 'vague' may modify; a kind which is worthy of considerable philosophical attention.

4.1

For the moment we are concerned about the way in which vagueness is related to instances of communication; that is, vagueness of statements, utterances, paragraphs, and so forth. Such things as vague recollections and vague similarities will be briefly touched on in the final section. Now in order to understand what vagueness

is it is crucial to realize that any communication attempt must necessarily be in part an attempt to convey information. All this means is that if something is communicated, the person to whom the something is communicated must understand what is being said. No understanding means no communication. For example, when someone successfully asks a question, his desire is to receive, not give, information. But he must inform the interogatee that he is asking a question, and what is being asked: If he does not, then he does not successfully ask a question. More generally, unless some information is conveyed, a communication attempt will fail. A person cannot communicate unless he communicates <u>something</u>.

If a person completely fails to convey the information required for an understanding of what he is trying to get across, then what he says or writes is meaningless or nonsense.* If, however, what one says or writes is vague, then one can only carkly see what the person is talking about; that is, one can acquire some, but not all of the information necessary for a satisfactory act of communication. In other words, if a communication attempt is vague, then it is neither succussful nor

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*Realizing, of course, that the failure lies in what actually is said, not in the disclosure. One may be a victim of loose telephone wires, jack hammers in the background, the wandering mind of the listener, etc., all of which may impair the conveying of information, but have nothing to do with vagueness or meaningfulness.

utterly unsuccessful. Something said or written vaguely is wanting of, but not completely lacking in, the information necessary to provide an understanding of what one is or ought to be attempting to get across. And of course there are degrees of vagueness. Something which is very vague is closer to being meaningless than something only slightly vague. For example: "Reason as a final arbiter between right and wrong is corruptible. Necessity will override it from time to time with the 'reason of necessity'." It may here be seen that the writer is talking about morals, about rationally determined choices, about something which overrides reason, etc. Some understanding of what the writer is trying to communicate may be achieved by reading the statement. It is not meaningless. But neither is there complete communication: what is the 'reason of necessity'? We have some (vague) idea, but certainly not a satisfactory one. The statement is vague.

There are obviously infinitely many ways in which what is said (the statement) may not be sufficient to provide a satisfactory understanding of what is being expressed (the content). But <u>generally</u> what is said will fail either to specify or identify sufficiently well what is being referred to, or what is said about what is being referred to, or both. The first sort of failure (reference) usually requires elaboration or clarification to enable the listener or reader to acquire a firmer

understanding of what it is that is being talked about. This understanding is often sought by questions like, "What do you mean by...?"* or "What is a....?" The second sort of failure (syntax) may also require elaboration or clarification to eliminate the insufficiency, or it may require a complete revision of the cohesion of the passage or remark; that is; a clarification of how the things mentioned "fit together" or "connect". And obviously if the second failure obtains, the first will usually obtain as well.

When something which is vague is described as 'insufficiently informative', it is not so in the same way a trivial or superfluous statement is. The level of informativeness concerned with vagueness is the information necessary to understand what the speaker is trying or obliged to try to get across, whereas the level of informativeness concerned with triviality deals with the contribution to one's reservoir of knowledge. Consequently not all kinds of insufficient informativeness are signs of vagueness.

A further point needs to be heeded: 'Insufficient informativeness' must be viewed in respect to the context

*This, of course, does not entail that there is an identity between meaning and reference. But it is true that when the meaning of a statement is obscure, the reference in most cases will be difficult or impossible to determine.

where the communication attempt occurs, which is only natural because communication attempts only occur in contexts. In chapter II three categories of contexts relevant to vagueness were discussed. These three contexts--the situation, the proir knowledge of the listener or reader, and the preceeding or following parlance--bear upon whether a particular statement or remark is insufficiently informative. For it may be asked, insufficiently informative when? against what background? to whom? Information necessary in situation A for person P to understand what a speaker is trying to express could be insufficient, necessary or superfluous to another listener in another situation. Consequently it will not do to extract a statement, question, etc. from context and judge understandability (and hence vagueness) irrespective of the audience for whom the remark was intended. Oftentimes the audience is the only person or group qualified to assess something as vague. And so vagueness must be talked about in terms of vague <u>to</u> a particular audience and <u>under</u> particular circumstances.

The failure to impart information which provides sufficient understanding is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for vagueness. Something may fail to provide information sufficient for understanding in ways other than by being vague. For example, a sign in a used car lot says, "We achieve a favorable exchange

in all transactions." Now if the wary purchaser is to understand this sign, more information will have to be provided. Is the exchange favorable to the car lot only, or to both the car lot and the buyer? This could be clear from the context, e.g., the sign goes on to say "favorable to all parties"; or the buyer realizes the intent of the sign from knowing the owner of the lot. But assuming that the context fails to clear the issue, we have a case of a message being insufficiently informative. But the fault leans more toward the category of ambiguity than toward vagueness. That a particular passage or utterance is guilty of one rather than the other is not always clear. In fact one is tempted to include ambiguity under the partial reference failure of vagueness. To do so would not be wrong and could possibly lead to a more comprehensive understanding about how the use of language may allow communication failure. Nevertheless there are cases in which the appropriate description is 'ambiguous', and whether cases of ambiguity can be subsumed under cases of vagueness calls, I think, for a decision rather than a discovery.

But the fact remains that there are cases of ambiguity which are not ordinarily (also) called 'vague', and vice-versa. How instances of ambiguity are recognized and distinguished from those of vagueness needs

to be elucidated. As was shown in the previous paragraph, ambiguity is context-dependent like vagueness. If I say, "Hand me the key" while pointing at a stack of unmarked examinations, then what I say is not ambiguous despite 'key' being potentially ambiguous in other situations.

When the claim that some word or statement is ambiguous is made, what is meant is that there are several distinct interpretations of that word or statement, and the intended interpretation is not clear. If someone says that he has had twenty odd professors in his academic career, then from this alone it cannot be discerned whether he was speaking of approximately how many professors he has had, or describing them as well. There are then two perfectly clear and distinct interpretations which are candidates for the correct understanding, but which interpretation is right is unclear. With vagueness, however, there are not these clear interpretations available. One may venture or suggest what might be the proper way to interpret a vague passage; but it requires considerable reflection even to arrive at potential interpretations, and the list could never be exhaustive. With ambiguity the interpretations leap out, so to speak, trading on the homonymy of a word or phrase. Furthermore, the candidates for proper interpretation (if indeed there are any) of a vague passage will neither be distinct nor

readily enumerable or determinable. When one says of a vague passage "he might have meant this, or this..." the candidates are interrelated, all being "covered" by the passage. And these candidates call for extensive interpretive work on the part of the listener; however, successful interpretative work is not usually possible. But having approximately twenty teachers is not like having exactly twenty teachers who were not playing with a full deck, so to speak. 'Odd' has two distinct, quite unrelated uses which create the two distinct, quite unrelated interpretations.

Another means by which a speaker or writer could fail to express himself well enough to be sufficiently understood is for him to be arcane or cryptic. In this situation the speaker expresses himself in words or a sentence structure which is unnecessarily obstruse or pedantic. This is a fault relative to the difficulty of the idea which the speaker is trying to get across; for if one is arcane it is thereby implied that what was expressed could have been said more simply. Calculus texts, as a rule, are neither arcane nor vague; they are simply difficult to understand, so no fault may be traced to the writer.

When a person's speech or writing is arcane it is not as though the information necessary for a sufficient understanding is not there, as is the case with vagueness.

Instead the information is there; however, it is unnecessarily difficult to unravel and hence will require several readings or repetitions for the information to be understood sufficiently. No amount of readings or repetitions will cure vagueness. If, however, the context is set such that further readings are impossible, then vagueness would obtain, as sufficient understanding would not be possible. So the overlapping between vagueness and arcane-ness is considerable when there can be no further encounter with the passage in question.

A third close neighbor to vagueness is incomprehensibility, though not so close as the other two. Here the sufficient understanding is not provided because what is being expressed is beyond the scope of understanding of the listener, and hence the information is not providable. Now what is incomprehensible to one person may not be to another, as what is vague to one will not be to someone else. Incomprehensibility is context dependent too. Of course something may be so incomprehensible or so vague that no one, regardless of the background information available, could understand it. But then total incomprehensibility and total vagueness simply amount to meaninglessness. Vagueness, nevertheless, traces the problem to the expressing, incomprehensibility to the subtlety or complexity of the idea being expressed, relative to the listener.

4.2

Having given a general account in the previous section of what vagueness is and how it relates to other similar language problems, I will now investigate three different areas or subspecies of vagueness. These subspecies are: being unclear, being too general, and exceeding the precision limits of a word or phrase. So far as I can see, these three subspecies exhaust the category of vagueness, but do not mutually exclude each other. Two subspecies of vagueness (syntax obscurity and partial reference failure) were mentioned in the first section. The distinction between these two subspecies does not coincide with the distinctions discussed below. Any of the three subspecies save the last can be insufficient either in terms of syntax obscurity or partial reference failure. The last subspecies, exceeding the precision limits, will always be a partial reference failure. However being too general will usually be or tend to be a partial reference failure, and being unclear will usually be either a partial reference failure or both.

One of the ways in which a vague passage may be insufficiently understandable is by being too general. For example, a tourist asks a park ranger, "How can I identify a grizzly bear?" and the ranger responds, "By its behavior." Now up to a point there is understanding

difficulty in the response--the ranger explicitly picks out the relevant characteristic. Yet the context demands further information, namely what kind of behavior grizzlies uniquely exhibit. The context must be considered when judging whether the information contained in a remark provides a sufficient understanding. With this remark there is information demanded which the ranger does not supply. His response is not a sufficient answer to the question, and his statement is vague only because it is a purported answer to the question and yet does not satisfactorily refer to the relevant specific behavior.

Conversely, if further specifics (namely what kind of behavior) were not demanded, then not supplying them is faultless. Vagueness would not then obtain. Moreover, if the ranger did not stop with the remark, but went on to specify what kind of behavior, the information would be supplied and there would be no vagueness. Different contexts demand different degrees of specificity, detail or precision. And it is not how general a remark is, but the gap between the detail or precision provided and that demanded which determines vagueness.

Some general statements (All cows eat grass) account for all of the relevant specifics involved (This cow eats grass, that cow eats grass). By the nature of their construction such general statements preclude the necessity for specifics. Other kinds do not, and it is these

which are most liable to be vague. For if we are told that we can identify a grizzly bear by its behavior, we do not know how to make a specific statement which contains the information crucial to distinguishing grizzlies from other bears.

It should be clear from what has been said that there is no correspondence between how vague and how general a statement is. General statements are not necessarily vague even though statements may be vague because they are too general. Nor are general statements or requests necessarily more vague than particular ones.

With the second subspecies the context is still crucial, but less so. If a remark is unclear, then there is no need to inquire about the information demands of the context. But the context is still crucial because vagueness must be assessed in context; in this case to whom and under what circumstances there is an understanding difficulty. With this subspecies, what is said requires elucidation rather than amplification. Instead of the speaker needing to say more specifically what he is referring to he needs to render more explicit what he has already said. An earlier cited case will serve as an example: "Reason as a final arbiter between right and wrong is corruptible. Necessity will override it from time to time with the 'reason of necessity'." By labelling such an expression 'vague', one presumes that the speaker or writer has in

mind what he wants to say, only he does it poorly. But because (a) we take it that the speaker has some idea of what he wishes to say, and (b) it can be (vaguely) discerned what the speaker is getting at, the expression is vague in the sense of being unclear or obscure.

When it is said that an expression is unclear, what is meant is that what the speaker is trying to say with this expression is unclear. The listener or reader has difficulty understanding exactly what is being said. But 'vague' applies to expressions, not to what one is trying to say. So 'unclear' has a wider range of application than does 'vague'.

The third subspecies of vagueness occurs when a word or phrase is placed in a context which demands more precision than the word or phrase is capable of yielding. Hence the "precision limits" of the word are exceeded. But it is <u>not</u> the word or phrase which is vague, but the appropriate linguistic context. For example, we may say, without being vague, "The inhabitants of St. Paul, Minnesota tend to be excellent hockey fans." But if one were to say, "There are exactly twenty thousand inhabitants of this town", the statement (not the word) would be vague in that he put 'inhabitant' in a context which requires him to specify exactly what constitutes being an inhabitant. Are commuters inhabitants? Renters? Influx population? Children? His audience does not know what there are twenty thousand of. 'Inhabitant' has been

placed, without proper modification, in a context beyond its precision limits. It is not vague in being too general. The problem lies not in what kind of inhabitants are relevant, but in what constitutes being an inhabitant. The speaker is guilty of a partial reference failure.

To sum up, these three somewhat divergent subspecies show the impossibility of giving a more detailed general account of vagueness beyond saying that it is a failure to provide the information sufficient to enable the audience to understand what the speaker is trying or called upon to express. What will be sufficient and what sorts of information is lacking and in what way the understanding is unsatisfactory will depend both on the relevant contexts of the expression and in what way the expression is vague.

4.3

In this section I want to discuss the topic of truth or falsity of vague statements, as this has on the whole been musunderstood in the pertinent literature on vagueness, primarily discussed in two articles by Haig Khatchedourian[1]. I want to argue that all vague statements are true or false, and that being vague has no effect on their truth value.

There is a distinction concerning statements between being true or false and being determinable to be true or

false. A statement is true or false regardless of the presence or absence of procedures by which someone could investigate the truth or falsity. There are many statements which are true or false whose truth value cannot be determined because of physical "handicaps" (e.g. "There are 247,066 mountains on Pluto.") Other statements have indeterminable truth values for other reasons, such as "If Tom had arrived earlier, the party would have been livelier." There are statements which only I am in the position to determine the truth value of, such as statements in a code which only I know how to break, or "I am right now thinking of the moon."

Turning to the first subspecies of vagueness, any statement which is too general for the context it appears in will be true or false and determinably so by others. Or if it is not, the indeterminability will not be a result of the vagueness. For example, it would be false to say that one can identify a grizzly "by its behavior" if in fact the only way to identify one was by the shape of its face and the hump between its shoulders. More generally, any statement which is vague because it is too general is, for lack of other defeating reasons, either true or false, and the truth value is determinable at least by experts in the field. But no one but the speaker may judge the truth value of the relevant specifics until he has disclosed what they are.

Concerning the second subspecies, it must be remembered that when someone is accused of being vague, there is something which he is trying, however poorly, to get across. Otherwise he speaks gibberish or nonsense. But it cannot be discerned by the audience clearly enough what that something is, so the charge of vagueness is levied. The reader is very often not in a position to know what sort of thing would count toward a vague statement being true or false. He is not in a position to agree or disagree. But the speaker, being the one purporting the statement, must be in a position to agree with it. Consequently he knows, in at least a rudimentary way, what sorts of things would count toward the truth or falsity of the statement. He might not <u>in fact</u> be able to determine the truth value, but that is a different matter. The statement does have a truth value, and the speaker will be in the position to determine it.

The same argument holds basically for those statements which are vague because the precision limits of a word or phrase have been exceeded. The audience (because the statement is vague) cannot determine the truth value until they have further information about the reference of the troublesome word or phrase. The speaker, however, must have some better notion of what he is referring to than he has been able to communicate, otherwise he has no business asserting the claim and it thereby has no status as a

statement. He at least must be in a position to determine the truth value, even though he may in fact (e.g. by virtue of a physical handicap) not be able to do so. Occasionally a statement will be so outlandish that the listener can pronounce it false whatever the precise reference of the troublesome word or phrase, as for example if someone claimed that there are six million inhabitants in Key West, Florida. In sum, vague statements are statements, and have a truth value as such.

4.4

J. L. Austin, claiming that 'vague' is itself vague, has listed seven features which might lead someone to pronounce a description vague. The discussion of these features will throw light on other areas of linguistic fault related to vagueness and show how vagueness differs from them. They are[2]:

> It (the description) might be (a) a rough description, conveying only a 'rough idea' of the thing to be described; or (b) ambiguous at certain points, so that the description might fit, might be taken to mean, either this or that; or (c) imprecise, not precisely specifying the features of the thing described; or (d) not very detailed; or (e) couched in general terms that would cover a lot of rather different cases; or (f) not very accurate; or perhaps also (g) not very full or complete.

Out of these seven features, (a), (c), (d) and (e) amount to the same thing in relation to vagueness, and (b), (f) and (g) have nothing to do with it at all. If a description is ambiguous, the appropriate feature then is ambiguity,

not vagueness. The differences between vagueness and ambiguity have already been discussed in the first section and need not be repeated here.

Neither accurate nor inaccurate descriptions are necessarily vague. To say that a description is inaccurate is to say that it is incorrect: e.g. describing an eight and one-half inch long pencil as being eight inches long, or five inches long, etc. However, to say that the pencil is approximately eight inches long would not be inaccurate, although perhaps imprecise. If I inaccurately described the pencil as red, that does not mean that the pencil is a shade of red I failed to specify, but instead that it is not red at all. So accurate descriptions may be either vague or non-vague, just as inaccurate ones may be.

To describe something fully or completely is to describe it extensively, not precisely. When a description is not complete or full, something has been left out. That means that a full description brings in all or very many of the features of what is being described, as opposed to describing each feature in detail. Describing a pencil as red and eraserless is more complete than describing it as red. But neither is vaguer than the other. And it is more detailed or precise, not more complete, to describe the pencil as crimson rather than red. Someone who is asked to give all of the features of a pencil and only gives two or three describes the pencil incompletely, not vaguely.

Features (a), (c), (d), and (e), however, are, in this context, synonymous; a rough description of the Taj Mahal--white with domes and pillars--is imprecise, not very detailed, and couched in general terms which could cover a lot of rather different cases. If a description is imprecise, it is not very detailed, and hence does not distinguish what is being described from other different cases. We have only a rough or general idea of what is being described. All of these features are classifiable under the heading of inspecificity; and it has already been shown how inspecificity, as a reference failure, may (depending on the context) indicate vagueness. But it is not the only feature; Austin's list of features, besides being inaccurate, is incomplete (but it is not vague). He does not touch on other features of vagueness, such as being unclear.

Many philosophers besides Austin have claimed that 'vague' is itself vague. This is curious, as we do not necessarily feel insufficiently informed when we are told what we have just said is vague. Austin's contention is especially curious for several reasons. I have shown that not all the features he lists are relevant to vagueness, and even those which are, amount to a rephrasing of the same point. But even if there are several different ways that a description may be vague (and there are), that does not entail 'vague' being vague. Simply because there are

several different ways to put out a fire or to skin a cat, we do not from that conclude that 'putting out a fire' or 'skinning a cat' is vague or even ambiguous. Austin is here subject to criticism in light of the point he himself raises in his very next paragraph: it is uses of words, not words that are vague. It was shown in chapter II that this is a step in the right direction, even though it is not a radical enough departure from regarding words as vague. But to say that 'vague' is vague is to call a word vague.

4.5

Ranging somewhat far afield from the primary focus of this chapter, namely to analyze vagueness as a fault of the use of language, I shall in this section very briefly discuss the application of 'vague' to non-linguistic phenomena and raise what I think to be some philosophical issues of considerable importance. This section has little in common with the first four sections of the chapter in which the linguistic application of 'vague' is discussed. This section is used to point up the fact that the word 'vague' may happily apply to phenomena which have nothing to do with communication obstacles.

First there are substantives which the word 'vague' may modify which denote highly specialized kinds of discourse, such as 'directions', 'excuses', 'descriptions', and 'accounts'. These I bring up only in anticipation of

later points I wish to make, as they fall neatly into the analysis given in the first four sections of this chapter. But then there are substantives like 'idea', 'recollection', 'understanding', 'resemblance', 'memory' which 'vague' may happily modify yet which have apparently little to do with language. With any of these, 'vague', when appropriate is synonymous to 'dim', or 'faint' or 'remote'. Yet we do not speak of dim paragraphs or remote statements. 'Vague' with such non-linguistic substantives might also be synonymous with 'unclear', but not 'unclear' in the sense described above (e.g. problematic to understand): rather 'unclear' in the sense of 'indistinct' or 'hazily grasped'. Indeed a vague expression may lead to a hazy understanding or idea in the listener, but the expression is not hazy or indistinct (although what is being expressed is), and the understanding or idea is not problematic to understand.

'Vague' then retains its critical character when applied to substantives such as 'idea' and 'memory'. A vague memory is still a memory, no doubt, but using 'vague' to describe it qualifies it. It is imperfect, could stand improvement (i.e. refreshing) to "bring it into better focus". More importantly, the relating or disclosing of it will very likely be couched in vague language. This is the basis upon which the range of the sort of substantives 'vague' may modify is expanded. If I have only a vague or remote idea about how porcupines copulate, then I can only

give a rather vague account or description of porcupine copulation.

Furthermore there are certain unique characteristics of the group of things which may be described as vague. They are never tangible, reified entities. They are never solids, liquids or gases. They cannot be folded, spindled, dissected, weighed or fondled. Conversely we do not speak of vague clouds, vague footballs, vague cattle, etc. The substantives 'vague' may modify are of a very special sort. They do not denote persons, places or things, instead they are merely the substantive form of actions.

In grammar we have what are called verbals--participles, infinitives, gerunds--which denote actions yet are not verbs. The subject of the sentence "Fishing requires skill and patience" is in fact an action. Moreover, a word need not be either a verb or a verbal to denote actions. For example, 'slap' used as a noun denotes an action, as does 'toss', 'glance', and 'dash'. In fact the noun denoting the action need not be identical with the verb form, as is the case with 'movement', 'flight', 'arrival', and 'departure', which do not have the traditional '-ing' gerund ending. The noun and the verb denoting the action may not even be cognates. For 'debt' is nothing more than the noun form of 'to owe'. "What do I owe him?" and "What is my debt to him?" are plainly identical in meaning; there is no debt without owing, and when the debt

ceases, nothing is owed. It will not do simply to say the debt is what is owed, for it is money or a favor that is owed, not a debt.*

Now there are significantly more complicated ways in which that which a noun denotes may be derived from an action, such as 'building' from 'to build', and so forth. But that is beyond the scope of this thesis. What I want to claim is that any substantive which 'vague' modified is a noun denoting an action. And this is why the things we call vague are not the sorts of things which may be held, spindled, dissected, etc. For the sorts of things we hold and dissect are reified entities, not actions.

It was stated earlier that "I owe him nothing" is equivalent in meaning to "I have no debt to him". I now want to extend this equivalence to include all the non-linguistic substantives which vague is used to modify. Where x is the noun form of an action and x' is the verb form, and if x is a non-linguistic substantive which 'vague' is used to modify in ordinary language, then "A vague x" is equivalent in meaning to "x'es vaguely". To have a vague recollection is to vaguely recall; to vaguely remember is to have a vague memory of; to have vague knowledge of is

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*In some contexts "owe" may be used happily, where the use of debt is not so palatable, as in the case of owing to any person kindness or honesty. Here "owe" takes on the sense of duty, whereas "debt" would connote burdensome responsibility. But in the great majority of cases, 'debt' and 'owe' mean the same.

to vaguely know. And to vaguely resemble is to have a vague similarity to. It goes without saying that 'vague' is not applicable to just any noun denoting an action. We do not speak of vague dances or vague touches.

The reason we do not apply 'vague' to nouns denoting non-actions is that such things cannot be hazy or dim. They may be seen hazily or lit dimly, or <u>appear</u> hazy through the fog. But when a mountain is seen hazily or looks hazy, there is no temptation to say that the mountain itself is hazy, much less that it is vague. But it has already been shown that this is not the sense or 'hazy' ('blurred') which is synonymous to 'vague' ('unclearly grasped, understood or fixed upon'). The sort of thing we are trying to communicate when we call memories, ideas, and so forth vague simply does not apply to tangible entities.

FOOTNOTES

Chapter I

[1]Bertrand Russell, "Vagueness", Australasian Journal of Philosophy, I (1923) p. 87.

[2]Ibid., p. 89-90.

[3]Donoghue v. Stevenson (1932) A.C. 562.

[4]Max Black, "Vagueness, an Exercize in Logical Analysis", Language and Philosophy, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1949, p. 28.

[5]Ibid., p. 30f.

[6]Ibid., p. 43.

[7]Ibid., p. 44-45

[8]Carl Hempel, "Vagueness and Logic" Philosophy of Science, VI (1939) p.165.

[9]William Alston, Philosophy of Language, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964, p.84.

[10]Ibid., p. 85.

[11]Frederick Waismann, "Verifiability" in Flew, ed., Logic and Language (1st series) Oxford: Blackwell, 1952, p. 119.

[12]Alston, p.94.

[13]W.V.O. Quine, Word and Object, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960 chapter IV.

[14]Carl Hempel, p. 177-178.

[15]Norman Malcolm, "Moore and Ordinary Language" in Chappel, ed. Ordinary Language, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964, p. 19-20.

[16]Alston, 94-95.

Chapter III

[1]Max Black, "Reasoning with Loose Concepts", Dialogue, II (1963) p. 4-5

[2]Bohan, p. 3-4

[3]Grace deLaguna, Speech: Its Function and Development, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1927, p. 90-91.

Chapter IV

[1]Khatchadourian, p. 141 and Haig Khatchadourian, "Vagueness, Meaning and Absurdity", American Philosophical Quarterly II (1965) p. 121.

[2]J. L. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia p. 126.

[17]Irving M. Copilowish, "Borderline Cases, Vagueness, and Ambiguity", Philosophy of Science, VI, (1939) p. 187.

[19]A.C.Benjamin, "Science and Vagueness" Philosophy of Science VI (1939) p. 426.

[20]Found in C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, The Meaning of Meaning, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923, p. 46.

[21]J.R. Bambrough, "Unanswerable Questions", Supplementary Volume to Aristotelian Society XL (1966), p.160.

[22]J.L. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p.73-74.

Chapter II

[1]W.V.O. Quine, p. 126.

[2]Haig Khatchedourian, "Vagueness", Philosophical Quarterly, X (1962) p. 138-152.

[3]Ibid., p. 142 and 151-152

[4]James Bohan, Vagueness: A Critical Examination of Some Traditional Analyses, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1971, p.113-114.

[5]Ibid., p.114

[6]J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words, New York, Oxford University Press, 1962, p.98.

[7]J.L. Austin, Sense and Sensibilia, p. 126.

[8]Ibid., p.126.

[9]J.L. Austin, How To Do Things With Words, p. 98.

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